

# *Access to Learning and Asian Open Universities: In Context*

---



*Delivered at the  
12th annual conference of the  
Asian Association of Open Universities  
"The Asian Distance Learner"*

*The Open University of Hong Kong  
Hong Kong SAR, China*

*4 - 6 November 1998*

*by  
Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
The Commonwealth of Learning*

Colleagues, the organisers of this meeting invited me to talk of access to learning in the Asian context. I have, over the last three years, been reminding all those who can hear that the challenge for people like you and I is not about ways of increasing access but the means to ensure that the access we create is meaningful in the context of the societies we live in. My presentation this morning is about meaningful access and it begins with my belief that education, as a resource, is a basic and fundamental right. As Jacques Delors, the French statesman, wrote in his introduction for the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century: Education is fundamental in the social and personal development of human beings. It is an indispensable asset for humankind as it attempts to attain the ideals of peace, freedom and social justice. I like to believe that the crafters of the report spoke of an educational provision for all and not just a few. The ALL includes individuals in our societies who for whatever reasons have been denied encouragement to consider learning opportunities. Such people in the context of this continent are many - more in millions rather than thousands. If we, as distance educators, wish to be serious about providing an educational opportunity for ALL then there are some fundamental assumptions and paradigms that requires changing. These changes are not limited to one geographical region or another; it is near universal; these changes are not limited to one sector of education or another; it is all encompassing; these changes are not limited to one part of an institution or another; it is a total transformation. I wish to take this presentation further in three parts:

- First, I would like to find out whom the Asian Learner is.

- Secondly, I would like to share with you some of the barriers that impede access to the Asian Learner.
- Thirdly, I would like to challenge you to design initiatives that would enable freedom of access to learning by ALL those who want that access, here in Asia. This challenge is not just to policymakers and senior managers, but also to academic colleagues who hold the key to ultimately make a difference and bring about change.

Your seminar is on the Asian learner. It is an interesting time to ponder over the Asian (learner). Who is this Asian that you have in mind. Just as a number of our political leaders are fond of describing an Asian value, an Asian democracy and Asian ethic, I suppose the academic community is desirous of creating a label called the Asian Learner. Depending on your source of information will be the image of this learner. The popular press (at least in North America) basically labels those parts of the planet between the land mass east of the Korean peninsula and west of Myanmar as their Asia. This is the Asia where tigers bred at one time and is now the source of the flu pandemic that is sweeping the world. It is an Asia made up of mostly individuals who have opportunities to receive almost free primary education, less so of post-primary education. They have greater access to information and communication technologies, but not to the point of, say, having easy and free access to the Internet. They may get to this point someday, but it is still a fair distance away. Until the latter part of last year, this Asia had quite a comfortable level of personal wealth and the owners of the wealth were not averse to using it for education and training. The continental mass west of Myanmar, at least in the front pages of the popular press, did not count as Asia.

That landmass west of Myanmar also has equal claim to being Asian. It does not get reported extensively in the popular press (in an age where the market is the news). In this part of Asia, the people are not as rich. Access to primary education is not yet universal; participation in secondary and vocational education of the relevant age cohort is less than 50%. While there are thousands of colleges and universities, the demand for such places far exceeds the supply to the point that less than 6 persons per hundred thousand head of population can hope to get a place to study. Among those denied places are girls, women, mature students and individuals in vulnerable situations. The situation is so sad that it provoked one reporter of the highly respected Human Development Centre to declare that, "South Asia has emerged by now as the most illiterate region in the world." (Human Development in South Asia 1998. Human Development Centre. OUP, Karachi, Pakistan.)

Then there is the Asia that is seen through the eyes of geo-political observers, development agencies, international bankers and people like you and I. This Asia shares a link. The link is the landmass that stretches from the Korean Peninsula in the east to the borders of Afghanistan in the west, from the Sino-Russian borders in the Northeast to the atolls of the Maldives in the Southwest. This continuous landmass and the islands are home to some 1.8 billion people. These people are spread over some 19 nations and two of them account for two-fifths of humanity. Their civilisations are ancient and so too are their traditions of learning and their storehouse of knowledge. They speak 600 languages, and of these spoken languages, some 60 have written scripts. Despite the wealth of resources, culture, knowledge and traditions of learning, this is a continent that faces tremendous challenges and has a direct impact on us as providers of educational services. Of all the challenges, none is more crucial than the nature, growth and

structure of Asia's populations.

The growth of populations and their needs will continue to pose the greatest challenge to the nations and institutions of this continent. The populations of Asia's poor countries will grow much faster and vastly outnumber Asia's richer nations. Not only will populations grow but the age structure will also change. The richer parts of Asia will get older while the poorer parts of Asia will continue to be young. While those of us who find ourselves in locations such as Japan, Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong, etc., may have to consider educating individuals entering the third age, others in places such as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh may have to cope with a massive increase in providing basic, technical and undergraduate levels of education for the 6 to 24 year-olds.

The size of the populations and their economic status will also lead to another phenomenon which will have another kind of impact on provisions of education. Asia's population is still largely rural. This is not expected to remain so. There is a drift from rural to urban locations. What this drift does is to take the poorly educated low skilled rural person to urban areas. This drift takes place in both the rich and poor Asian nations alike. In 1955, about 271 million Asians lived in cities. By 1985, this number had grown to 747 million and by the end of the century around 1.2 billion Asians are expected to live, work, seek education and leisure in about 28 mega cities (a mega city is one with more than 4 million inhabitants). It is in this context of big, growing and shifting populations that the question of access needs to be addressed.

While we consider this question, it may not be out of place to remind ourselves that the promoters of open learning have constantly claimed that one good reason to establish 'open learning' infrastructure and build 'distance teaching' capacities is to take knowledge and training to those parts of our populations that are marginalised, isolated, underprivileged and unreachable by counterparts in traditional institutions.

In the context of this seminar, I would like to propose to you that meaningful access to educational provision in Asia would require your attention to some 365 million children for whom the school is still an unknown zone. These children are mostly found in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and other parts of South East Asia. Unless these nations begin to shift budgets in the direction of education, many observers believe that the situation will remain the same for the foreseeable future. In these same parts of the continent, adult illiteracy is just as rampant. The illiteracy here is at zero level where the only means of receiving and transmitting information is voice. While the situation is somewhat better in other parts of the continent it is not that much better. Document literacy (i.e. the ability to read and understand instruction) is the level at which the majority of Asians are. This low level begins to drop even further when we begin to consider quantitative literacy and further still, technical literacy. What these levels of dysfunctionality mean, is more poignantly stated in a report to the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life (1995) as follows:

In a world operating on written laws, rules and instruction, being illiterate is a severe handicap when participating in decisions of life: it is tantamount to disability affecting every aspect of living. It confines job opportunities to the most menial and low paid tasks. It means being unable to read instructions on a packet of seed, a tin of powdered milk or an oral contraceptive. It means being unable to read newspapers,

street signs, and warning signals. It means the inability to check if a title deed is faulty. And it means being exposed to fraud and expropriation.

That more than half this population are women and girl children can only mean that a substantial number of Asians are vulnerable to a whole range of abuses, exploitation, incapable of playing their role as parents, homemakers, etc. There is little or no chance of them being economically independent, socially active and spiritually enriched unless education is taken to them.

There is a second kind of Asian who requires access. This Asian is young, may have had a basic education, moved from a rural agricultural economy to an urban industrial one and in order to make sense of and profit from economic production, this person is in need of upgrading his or her skills level. These could range from higher reading, writing and numeracy skills to others such as trade and vocational abilities. Out of school and underemployed youth, as many of you know, are a primary source of urban violence and social disruption.

A third kind of Asian who needs access to learning provision are those who find themselves in extremely dire circumstances. They are the unfortunate victims of war, civil strife, political instability, the physically disabled and socially disenfranchised. These are people who cannot go to places of learning - they are either physically prevented or incapacitated. The region has its share of such vulnerable populations in fairly large numbers and educational provision for them is largely non-existent and where it is available, suffers from poor curriculum, learning resources and other necessary support.

The fourth kind of Asian where distance-teaching institutions can provide learning support are Minority Groups. Asia's minorities are seldom heard of. Yet these are populations who need recognition, care, support and help both in terms of preserving their cultures, traditions, languages and rights but also in enabling them to participate in mainstream social, political and economic life. The extent and levels of training and education that are needed range from the immediate to the long-term. The concerns include training in the skills needed to deal with immediate minority problems (health, child care, etc.), medium term that provides knowledge to deal with skills development for advocacy, economic and social interactions, and long term which has to do with mainstreaming. (Report of an International Minority Rights Group Seminar, 1997).

The fifth kind of Asian who requires your service is the kind you already serve, i.e. those with sufficient prior learning experience. Even within this group, there are many that get disenfranchised because of their inability to cope with the administrative demands and academic practises of open universities.

Ladies and gentlemen, these then are the Asian Learners who need your services perhaps much more urgently than your present clients. These categories of people do not have resources of their own, seldom have advocates to speak for them and rarely have a capacity to agitate politically. The Asian Association of Open Universities has, among its membership, some of the biggest and certainly some of the best institutions of learning in the world. Together, your membership provides an educational service to between 2 - 3 million individuals. You should therefore take rightful pride in the contribution you make to this continent's progress from being the world's poorhouse to its powerhouse. It would be unreasonable

to request you to do more, but let me take the liberty of suggesting to you that you could consider doing differently. To do that, you may wish to take a closer look at the profile of the people you currently serve. I did a very quick scan of several open and distance education facilities (most of them are members of your association) and I found that those who benefit from your services are mostly:

- Males
- Urban dwellers.
- The high school educated.
- The employed, and therefore are part-time learners.

For purposes of comparison, I then looked at figures related to student characteristics of the traditional Asian Universities in a recent UNESCO publication. Their student populations are also mostly:

- Males.
- Children of middle class urban dwellers.
- Those with high school matriculation certificate.
- Those not employed, and therefore are in full-time study (though this may be changing in the richer parts of Asia).

Looking at these profiles, would you not ask yourselves the question that I asked of myself - do we really need dedicated distance teaching institutions which serve more or less the same kind of citizenry, perhaps modifying their delivery methods to allow some, but not a lot of latitude? If that is the case, what are the reasons behind the gap between rhetoric and reality? Many would claim a lack of 'resources' as a primary reason. It is my contention that the reasons for distance education services not reaching those parts of our communities, which are mostly marginalised, have little to do with a lack of resources. It may be, I think, more to do with a lack of passion (in many instances) or a lack of knowledge of the challenges and opportunities (in others). The "distance education community" has become comfortable with its successes, working in familiar environments where success is achieved with relative ease. In our search for 'respectability', we have become more and more like our counterparts of long tradition. If the open universities of the continent see themselves playing a different kind of a role from that of the traditional providers of education, then they may have to re-engineer themselves. They may have to do this for two reasons. The first has to do with altruism - we believe in our mission, want to do good and bring the light of learning for a better and more equal world. The second has to do with survival - if we are not different from our counterparts, would they begin to encroach on our turf, and given the large supply of academic talent, could they do better than us? In an extremely competitive and market driven environment, will our future be under threat? Daniel (1997) alluded to this threat in his popular book on the media and mega universities. I would like to plead with this audience to revive the passion to our missions that would require us to review the manner of our operations and, more importantly, begin the process of dismantling the many barriers we have created for ourselves. These barriers could include some or all of the following:

## Mind set

Prevailing and very strongly ingrained in our collective psyche is the notion that university education is something lofty and only concerns itself with the pursuit of "knowledge for knowledge sake" or in the words of the good Cardinal Newman "the high protecting power of all knowledge and science, of fact and principle, of inquiry and discovery, of experiment and speculation". In 19th century Europe, where the University was principally meant for clerics and medics, this would have been fine. In the 21st century world of ours, where "knowledge" becomes the very basis of economic and social well being, our colleges and universities need to release themselves from this bind. A university in its community should be about "lighting lamps" and Open Universities are about lighting millions of lamps. I think, as a group, we challenged some paradigms in the past, but these are not enough. We must have the courage to challenge a lot more including the paradigm that restricts us to delivering only post-secondary education.

## Entrance criteria

Institutions that proclaim to be "open" still continue to select their enrolees. In benign environments, such selection is based on prior learning experience or performance, but in politically narrow environments, selection of participants could be based on colour, race, socio-economic status, nationality, citizenship. There are yet other institutions that require their students to have a computer, connectivity to the Internet, etc. Higher education, in particular, tends to be more selection oriented, setting rigid requirements for participation (presumably to maintain a paradigm of quality). Institutions genuinely committed to open access must attempt to identify the learners' academic needs first before designing courses rather than starting with courses and looking for students to fit them.

## Curriculum

The design of curriculum and its transformation into learning experience in open learning institutions must be enabling in nature. Open learning practises, by definition, assume heterogeneity among its participants. This then requires more than a provision for flexibility. It requires us to design instruction that empowers learners to take control of their learning. Curriculum must keep the development of individuals and communities as its end constantly in view. Given the complex changes that are taking place around us, coupled with the enormous amount of information that is generated, it is crucial for us to recognise that if education were to succeed in its objectives, then it must be re-organised, as one UNESCO report says, around the four pillars of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. (Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century). Our courses are perhaps good at imparting instruction on learning to know, but fail badly in all the other three aspects. The learners who need our services would wish instruction to relate to their lives and experience and that, unfortunately, are the remaining three pillars.

## Tradition

Our teaching organisations have developed and become bound by traditions of academe, which dictates

the design of the curriculum, its transformation into learning experience, assessment of prior learning, protocols of exit standards, administrative arrangements, academic governance, delivery systems and learning schedules. All these are centred on the needs of faculty rather than governed by the difficulties of learners. Access is about learners and, therefore, the freedom to learn wherever and whenever should dictate practise. Not designing systems accordingly effectively cuts off those who need your services most.

## The tyranny of time

Even as a fraternity, we claim Openness. If you pause for a moment and think, you will notice that the Asian Open Universities are as much governed by TIME as their traditional counterparts. Students are not allowed to start their study programmes whenever they like; there is a start date and (if students wish to complete the course successfully) they also have an end date. They should sit for examinations on a particular date, attend tutorials and practical classes, etc., all according to a timetable. As a taskforce report to the International Council for Distance Education recorded "The instructional paradigm, therefore, holds learning prisoner to time constraints applied by an arbitrary force or by the preferred work schedule of a faculty member. In the desired (new) learning paradigm, learning becomes the primary driving force and, since learning can occur at any time and at anyplace 24 hours every day, the constraints of time are removed". (Report of the Taskforce of the International Council for Distance Education Standing Committee of Presidents. Chairman James W. Hall. 1966.) While it would be unfair to describe the present practise of many of Asia's Open Universities as completely governed by time, dictated by the convenience of the faculty, members of this audience will agree that those time driven aspects of our current practise are barriers to many students who fall outside of our catchment.

## Access to technology

Any discussion on access to learning at the tail end of this century cannot ignore the reality of the new technologies that have intruded into our lives. Like many of you, I am also excited by them, enjoy using them and in my weaker moments, get carried away by their potential as learning tools. While on the one hand technology can enhance access, on the other technology itself becomes a barrier. Even as we near the end of the century, some 500 million people world-wide may not have made their first telephone call let alone use the Internet. In her book, the Death of Distance, Frances Cairncross (1997) quoted an International Telecommunication Union Report which stated that in a number of countries, the number of people has been growing faster than the number of telephone lines. While we keep our eyes on the horizon on technology and its application in distance education, we also at the same time have to keep our feet on the ground. Our use of technology to deliver must surely be dictated more by access to it, than by any other consideration.

## Mobility

Though not a major impediment to access, the difficulty our institutions have in recognising prior learning and life experience has been and will increasingly become a barrier to many potential students. We all subscribe to the notion of a "seamless canvass" but many of us have so much difficulty in making

that seamless canvass a reality.

In Jomtien, Thailand, a very impressive group of internationalists met to discuss and present a plan to the world. The plan was to bring Education for ALL regardless of gender, race, age, prior qualification, economic status, and social standing and political leanings. I was not at the conference, but I was one of those who became glassy eyed at the sound of the decibels that came out of that conference. Listen to what the declaration said:

". . . reaffirm the right of all people to education. This is the foundation of our determination, singly and together, to ensure education for all.

We commit ourselves to act co-operatively through our own spheres of responsibility, taking all necessary steps to achieve the goals of education for all. Together, we call on governments, concerned organisations and individuals in this urgent task."

Ten years after that declaration, the state of the world, in as far as the aspirations of Jomtien are concerned, is one of sadness. In actual numbers, there are more people who are in need of educational provision today than ever before. Perhaps, you and I are too small to change the entire world, but you know I think that as a fraternity we can make a little difference. What would it require of us to make that difference? Let me enumerate my wish list:

## Access and the academic

Until and unless the academic staff of institutions is willing to accept and play a responsible role in broadening access - access will continue to be denied for many. Cynics will say that most academic staff in our schools, colleges and universities do not have any overriding reason to promote greater access to learning. They will cite the following as reasons for the disinterest:

That there is no reward in excelling in teaching, so why would teachers pursue unprofitable ventures?

That teaching at a distance requires an enormous amount of time for planning the instruction - this is time taken away from research and therefore loss of academic respect. Why would teachers commit academic suicide?

That to participate in distance education is pandering to those wishing to commoditise knowledge and this is not the purpose of academic institutions. Should we contribute to making education a tradable commodity?

That academic freedom, autonomy and rights are lost when knowledge is packaged and its delivery is taken away from the hands of the academic. Why should we contribute to the destruction of academic tradition?

Despite the cynicism in some circles, I firmly believe that the academic community believes in lighting the lamp. It is those from the traditional academic environments that gave life to distance education practices. The challenge of taking knowledge has an inherently "noble" feel about it. What is needed to transform the feel to reality is for us to have:

- a greater sensitivity to whom our potential learners are and to make access to our courses a little less rigid.
- a greater knowledge of the learners' environment to reduce real and perceived barriers to the courses we design.
- an appreciation of the challenges learners could face and help them to be successful learners through imaginative design and presentation of materials.
- Access and the institution

How should our educational institutions respond to the challenges we confront particularly in respect to teaching and learning? Our institutions should accept as a starting point that providing access to learning is not a sufficient condition for arguing greater opportunity to learning - equality of opportunity is a matter of outcomes and not merely resource availability. If we can accept that institutional responsibility should begin with policy decisions, then investments in staff development and training must be a matter of high priority. It is a paradox of our time that educational institutions that are about human development spend so little of their budgets on their own human development. Those engaged in distance education must have a very wide range of skills, and unless training is provided for the acquisition of these skills, we will continue to see mediocrity in practice. Mediocre staff provides mediocre learning environments.

My other two wishes to Institutions will be a re consideration of their policies on entry behaviour of students and the use of learning technologies.

## Access and the state

My third wish is to see our governments play a strategic role in broadening and liberalising access to learning. Governments should be the influence maker and not the controller; they must articulate societies' overall goals in creating communities of learners. More particularly, governments can govern the speed and direction of educational reform by:

Reconfiguring the nature of public funding that recognises the need to support learning access to vulnerable sections of populations. It is not just the politically active and loud parts of society that should be funded, but provisions should also be made available to benefit those who have been left out of the educational loop for one reason or another.

Being a catalyst for institutional change: there is certain slowness, especially among our post-secondary institutions, to meet new demands and challenges. Governments can create new conditions, which can encourage institutions to adapt.

Open learning creates an environment for the development of certification and recognition of competencies as well as knowledge. The role of governments is crucial in developing national

frameworks of qualification that allows for the evolution of a seamless canvas. Such a canvas should facilitate learners to enter and exit learning at their convenience, receiving recognition at the end of each and every learning episode.

Being a builder of infrastructure from constructing multi-purpose community centres to laying the backbone for digital waves. Governments can further enhance the use of learning technologies by its teaching institutions and learning citizens by regulatory mechanisms that encourages the adoption of such technologies.

Ladies and gentlemen, you invited me to speak about Access and the Asian Learner in the context of Open Universities. I am not sure if I have moved away from my assigned task, but it seemed important to me that we, of the community of distance educators, remind ourselves of the mission, objectives and purpose of open universities in the context of our continent. Until some 14 months ago, the coming century was often described as the Asian century. I am not sure there are many people out there who would wish to say that today. Yet, the collective wisdom of the people of this huge landmass, their traditions of learning and the skills, knowledge and energy they are capable of bringing to any venture must give us the confidence to overcome our present challenges. Open Universities of the region can make a sound contribution to Asia's development. To do that, they must be willing to:

Adapt their current patterns of practice to enable access to a wider range of students.

Encourage their staff to take on new roles. As the means to knowledge and learning multiply, our teachers will increasingly be seen as the first agents of change both in the way they design their courses and in the way those courses are delivered and assessed.

I wish you well in your discussions over the next few days.