

# Open Education in Asia: Changing Perspectives



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It is an honour to be back in Manila and I am very grateful to Dr Melinda Bandalaria, the Chancellor for the invitation. Dr Patricia Arinto has been very gracious in her communications and it's always a pleasure to work with her.

The University of the Philippines Open University has been designated the National Centre of Excellence in Open Learning and Distance Education in recognition of its pioneering work in opening up education to the many who otherwise would never have had the opportunity. So it is appropriate that UPOU is hosting the AAOU 2016 conference on the theme of opening up education in Asia.

Because of the huge diversity and spread of the Asian region, I'll begin my presentation with a brief review of the context. We will then look at what we mean by open education today. I will then reflect on three pillars of openness, and identify the key issues that have emerged from the changing perspectives. In conclusion we will explore the possible way forward.

Since this is the first presentation of the conference, let us look at Asia today.

Asia is the largest and the most populous continent on the planet and home to 60% of the world's population. It has large countries like China and India as well as small ones such as the Maldives.

A few countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Japan are highly developed while the majority of others rank very low on the Human Development Index.

This unevenness in development is reflected in access to education in the different countries. While the Asian average of out-of-school children is 5%, there are many countries where over 25% children are still out of school. How can we bring these children back into schools?

It's not just the children—adult illiteracy in many Asian countries is over 25%--how do we propose to mitigate this situation?

While the GER in OECD countries is in the range of 40-50%, the Asian average barely exceeds 30%. In some countries it is well below 15%--whereas the World Bank estimates that for any country to achieve sustainable development participation in HE must be in the range of 40-50%. How will we increase access to large numbers?

Many governments believe that developments in technology can provide one potential solution. In the Asia Pacific region, only 40% of the population has access to the internet. In some countries it is even less than 20%. Can the internet be a possible technology option for opening up education?

However, mobile devices are proving to be a game-changer. The rapid rise of cell telephony and affordable tablets, are making a contribution towards turning the digital divide into a dividend. While only 40% of the population in the Asia Pacific region is connected to the internet, over 90% have access to mobile devices.

We have seen that Asia is a very diverse rather than a homogeneous region. There is vast disparity in the distribution of resources which are manifested in uneven development across the region. Yet within this diversity, we can see a thread of cultural unity. The dances we saw at dinner last night had a clear family resemblance with dances in my own country India. But one thing that binds the region is the high value and premium that it places on education as a means for development. If this aspiration is to become a reality there is a need for alternative approaches to accommodate the diverse educational requirements of the Asian people.

Opening up education for all is one way forward. What do we mean by open education?

In Asia, when we speak of open education, we usually refer to open and distance learning or to open universities. Opening up education also means the massification and democratisation of education for those hitherto kept outside its purview. And because women have traditionally been denied the opportunities for education, opening up education also means reaching the unreached.

Globally, the concept of open education has a wider and more contemporary connotation. As Tony Bates tells us, open education refers to Education for All or EFA, which meant providing universal primary education for all. In addition to opening access to courses and programmes, open education now includes, OER, open access research, open textbooks and open data.

As an ODL community, we have always understood that open education describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible.

The founding chancellor of the Open University of the UK, Lord Crowther defined openness in relation to people, places, methods and ideas. This forms the basis of what we mean by open education. Open education is a philosophic construct that advocates the removal of constraints and barriers to learning.

Many open universities do not insist on entry qualifications, allow learners to accumulate credits at their own pace and convenience and are flexible enough to allow learners to choose the courses they wish to study towards their qualification.

As governments and policy makers sought to expand access to education, reduce costs and improve standards, they realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. They began to invest in open universities. There has been a huge growth of open universities in Asia.

Here are the 41 universities in Asia that are known specifically as 'open' universities. If we are to count the number of institutions offering ODL in various forms such as virtual universities, RTVUs, dual mode universities, we will well exceed a thousand institutions.

Let us explore what some Asian universities mean by ‘open education’ by looking at their mission statement. To begin with our host institution, the UPOU declares that its purpose is to provide wider access to quality higher education and to promote nationalistic commitment among its staff and students.

The mission statement of the Open University of Malaysia is similar to the UPOU in widening access to quality education—but it goes beyond higher education to lifelong learning.

The open university of China claims openness as a core value and adds the dimension of opening up education through internationalisation and the objective to become a world class university.

Sukhothai Thamathirat Open University echoes the OUC’s aspiration to become a world class university that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning for all.

For Hanoi Open University, the priorities are to open learning opportunities for quality education and to combine national and international concerns.

The Open University of Sri Lanka also speaks of access, quality and affordability for lifelong learning.

If we look at what open education means by referring to the mission statements of these institutions, we find that it means increasing access to quality higher education and lifelong learning. It also emphasises the need to provide affordable education and to open up education on an international scale and beyond national jurisdictions and geographical boundaries. As we have seen, openness is an evolving concept and that there are degrees of openness in different institutions. How do we open up to embrace a wider diversity of needs and constituencies? Will this mean revisiting our mission statements to make them more contemporary?

Let us now consider the three aspects of openness that will help institutions to open up education to meet the needs of developing Asian countries.

The three aspects are interrelated and can be described as access, content and technology.

First, the issue of access. We could go back to 1840, when Sir Isaac Pitman used postcards to teach shorthand. This was followed by the University of London, or the People’s University, which opened up education to people who would otherwise never have had the opportunity. It introduced the notion of higher education without boundaries in 1858—not just geographical boundaries, for its first external exams were held in Mauritius but also boundaries of social class, aspiring to reach the ‘shoemaker in his garret’. The External Degrees became an influential model of openness and played a highly significant role in the establishment of several universities in the erstwhile colonies.

The first external degree exams in Asia were held in the 1880’s in Bombay, Calcutta and Colombo. In the early nineteen nineties external exams were held for students in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

This was followed by the rise of correspondence education in Asia when Japan, China, India and Sri Lanka opened up access to off campus students.

When the Open University, UK was launched the term ‘open education’ became popular and became a model for many open universities around the world. It pioneered the team approach to course development, which included subject experts, media personnel, editors etc.—a division of labour—that marks the industrial model of distance education. The OU has developed a reputation for the quality of its provision and is often ranked first in terms of student satisfaction.

The ten mega universities in Asia have thrown open the ivory towers of higher education to hundreds of thousands of students who would otherwise not have had the opportunity.

Over ten million students have benefited from the OU system.

The Asian OUs have extended the model so successfully implemented by the OUUK. The China Radio & TV Universities have formed a nation-wide ODL system comprising the Open University of China and other open universities, provincial RTVUs, RTVU branches at the municipal level and RTVU work stations at the county level and instructional classes (nodes). The entire system includes at least five mega-universities.

The Open University of Malaysia shows how a consortium of public and private institutions can lead to a win-win situation for all.

Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) adapted the model to its own context. It added two new dimensions—by providing secondary education through its open school and introducing skills development as part of its extension activities.

IGNOU is a mega-university, which has the largest number of student enrolments and offers the largest number of programmes in India. These have often become the blueprint for many courses offered by the 16 State Open Universities in the country.

One of the barriers to opening up higher education is the issue of costs, and it is not just in the West. Asian education is very high if we look at the amount it costs as percentage of the average income in 2015—61% of the average income in Japan, over 95% in South Korea, nearly 100% in China, nearly 350% in Indonesia and 500% in India. Even though families want to invest in educating their children, can they really afford it? Therefore, access will continue to remain a priority issue going forward and the role of ODL will be more important than ever before.

Can the use of free content help us cut down the costs of education? There has been a phenomenal growth of OER in the last few years. As we know, OER are educational materials which are free and freely available. OER can be reused and repurposed to suit different needs and could be available in any medium, print, audio, video, digital. One key difference between OER and other educational resources is that OER have an open license, which allows adaptation and reuse without having to request the copyright holder.

While the US played a leadership role in initiating OER, many Asian governments and other stakeholders are investing in the development of OER to open up quality educational content. Several major Asian initiatives have emerged. Some of these are OER Asia, the China Open Resources for Education Initiative, Vietnam's Open Courseware and Japan Open Courseware Consortium. Our host the UPOU is leading discussions on policy and practice in this field.

Several countries are developing OER policies—so far there is no OER policy at the national level in Asia while there are institutional policies in Bangladesh Open University, 4 open universities in India, Sri Lanka and Wawasan Open University, Malaysia. There are project level policies in India.

Often up to 80% of faculty time has been spent in course development. The use of OER can free some of this time for more student support and lower the costs of programme/course fees. Open universities can develop OER policies and build the capacity of their staff to harness the potential of OER.

The rise of OER signals three shifts for ODL institutions. Traditionally open universities had an industrial model—the open universities of the future will be a more connected model. There were course development teams within open universities responsible for creating content. Now the teams will be dispersed around the globe and will adopt/adapt existing OER. The rise of OER will encourage the student to be a producer rather than the consumer of content.

But OER are not the only means of opening up education. The Cape Town Declaration in 2007 is a visionary document that identifies the other dimensions of openness. It refers to open technologies that promote more collaboration and flexibility; better approaches to pedagogy, assessment and accreditation.

The third pillar of openness is technology—one manifestation of which is the MOOC platform which allows us to offer online courses to thousands of students around the world for free. MOOCs are an important solution to three key challenges in the current education system: one that it is rigid, two, it is highly expensive and three, it takes a lot of time to complete. Top universities have taken the lead in offering MOOCs to a world deprived of quality education at a low cost. How will MOOCs impact Open Universities?

We are witnessing a steady growth of MOOCs in Asia. Peking University, offers Chinese MOOCs for students and members of the public. JMOOC, of which the Open University of Japan is an active member, targets home makers and senior citizens, and Malaysian MOOCs supported by the Ministry of Higher Education, are meant for students and members of the public. India has developed Swayam, a MOOC platform that will open up opportunities for free quality education around the country.

The UPOU is offering MOOCs to provide training in skills related to call centre services and basic nursing.

Here again we can see three key developments. Open universities have so far largely operated within national or regional jurisdictions. With the MOOC platform, the world becomes a connected classroom. Students had limited interactions with tutors in study centres. Today, there is a greater emphasis on peer to peer interactions and the use of social media. Open universities will increasingly make use of emerging technologies to support their learners. Open Universities are well placed to engage with both OER and MOOCs. Their experience in content design and development can easily lead to effective adoption and adaptation of OER. Student support services can be strengthened by adapting MOOC technologies.

What has been the Asian contribution to both OER and MOOCs? One, breaking the language barrier of English-only content to local languages. Two, adopting a more blended approach in MOOCs rather than offering a purely online experience. Three, harnessing appropriate technologies such as mobile devices and phones to reach remote communities.

Let us now look at the changing priorities today at the international, national and institutional levels.

The international community has identified 17 sustainable development goals with Goal 4 focusing on education. The objective of this Goal is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all’ by 2030. The priority for the MDGs in 2000 was to commit the global community to providing universal primary education for all. Now the emphasis has shifted to tertiary education and lifelong learning, quality and equity and social inclusion. Open and distance learning will have a key role to play and can be effectively deployed to support the achievement of sustainable development.

The global community recognises this and proposes in the UNESCO Framework for Action that more countries should develop policies for providing quality distance tertiary education and use MOOCs and other technologies to enhance quality and access.

The second changed priority is the focus on skills at the national level. Globally, there is a huge gap between the skills we teach our graduates and the skills required by employers. In earlier days, a university degree was quite enough. Now employers are more demanding. According to a survey, over

80% of the firms in Japan said it was difficult to find qualified employees, in India it was over 60% and over 20% in China. How can open universities address this situation?

India plans to skill 400 million people by 2020. As PM Modi says, we need to develop skills with speed and at scale if we want our young people to contribute to national development.

The third priority is to recognise and accredit the skills and competencies acquired through various learning pathways and in various jurisdictions. MOOCs can never fully open up education unless there is a robust system of evaluation recognition and credit transfer in place. Malaysia has taken the lead in developing such a system.

What then can we do as open universities and ODL providers?

First, embrace lifelong learning and strengthen our outreach function to open up education to wider constituencies especially the unreached. Lifelong learning includes the whole spectrum of formal non-formal and informal learning. How do we recognise and accredit non-formal learning?

The second strategy is that in order to promote skills development, it is important to develop need based courses, which open up opportunities for livelihoods. This can be done in partnership with industry and the service sector which then gets trained human resources. Industry partnership is essential to create curricula that are appropriate and relevant to make learners employable.

The third step would be to train staff in the different aspects of effective distance learning delivery. Capacity building in curriculum, effective learner support, assessment techniques and the adoption and adaptation of OER and MOOCs would be some areas of focus.

What would it take to open up education in Asia? Would it be visionary leadership? More training and re-training of staff? Better collaboration and resource sharing? I'm sure you'll discuss and debate these issues over the next three days.

Thank you for your kind attention.