

Advancing Research in ODL: Where are the Missing Links?

Opening Keynote

**28th Annual Conference of the
Asian Association of Open Universities
Hong Kong, China**

28 October 2014

Advancing Research in ODL: Where are the Missing Links?

**Presented by
Professor Asha Kanwar
and co-written with Dr. K. Balasubramanian
Commonwealth of Learning**

President of AAOU, Secretary General, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to be here and I thank the organisers for the kind invitation. The Commonwealth of Learning is closely associated with the Asian Association of Open Universities and we make it a point to be present at these very dynamic annual conferences. My topic today is ‘Advancing Research in ODL: where are the missing links?’ which I have prepared jointly with my colleague Dr Balasubramanian. I hope it will serve to set the stage for the deliberations to follow.

After a brief review of the context of open and distance learning today, I will look at the status of research in ODL globally and in Asia. I will then outline three key areas for research followed by an examination of the missing links—why are we not achieving our full potential in ODL research? In conclusion, I will suggest some of the ways in which we can develop cultures of research within our institutions to make research an integral part of both our policy and practice.

But first the context.

In the last forty five years, we have seen the rise of open universities around the world, especially in developing countries.

As we know, Asia has over 70 open universities, 13 of which are mega universities. China has a long tradition of distance education offered through its China Radio and TV Universities and Open Universities.

The next wave of open universities in the Commonwealth is emerging in Africa. In addition to the Open Universities in South Africa, Tanzania, Nigeria, Zambia and Mauritius, we will see Open Universities in Kenya followed by Botswana in the next one year.

In addition, there is an increasing trend towards online learning. While the aggregate growth rate is 7.6% globally, interestingly, the highest growth rate is in **Asia** at 17.3%. **Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and China**, are five of the ten top countries with the highest eLearning growth rates. As technologies become more accessible both developing and developed countries will move towards more online and distance provision.

We have also witnessed the phenomenal growth of the private sector, which is registering 30% growth annually.

In countries like Chile, the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Asia, South Korea and Japan, nearly 80% of the students in higher education enroll in private institutions, many of them offering distance and online provision.

As the demand for higher education continues to grow, we find that ODL provision continues to be deployed to educate more people, at lower costs compared to what campus institutions are able to offer and opens up learning to those who would otherwise be excluded from such opportunities. The emphasis has been primarily on teaching and learning.

But teaching and learning are not the only roles of a university, which must also undertake research and outreach activities.

To what extent is this being done? What is the status of research in ODL?

It might be useful to remind ourselves of Borje Holmberg's definition of what constitutes DE research. He makes two distinctions: endogenous and exogenous. Endogenous research looks at work done within distance education, such as studying the methods, systems, media etc. Exogenous research focuses on the economic, demographic, cultural, social, and political contexts of ODL.

Different scholars and researchers have identified the missing links in distance education research over the years. Michael Moore observed in 1985 that distance education research was largely amateur, unsystematic and badly designed with very little value.

Fifteen years later, there does not seem to be a substantial change in how DE research is viewed. Saba laments the lack of theoretical underpinning which is also echoed by Hilary Perraton who calls DE research 'often atheoretical and predominantly descriptive'

Writing at around the same time, Prof Jegede identified the same gaps in DE research—lack of rigour, no consideration given to cultural, linguistic and environmental factors and inadequate attention to theory.

Another ten years later, Zawacki-Richter et al conducted a survey of 675 articles in five journals from Australia, Canada, UK, USA and found that DE research had focused mostly on 'instructional design' and 'individual learning' but neglected areas such as 'innovation, change management and intercultural aspects'.

It is also interesting to note that 80% of the articles come from five countries: Australia, Canada, China, UK and US from journals published in four English-speaking countries.

The same study concludes that male researchers are more likely to use quantitative methods while female researchers tend to use qualitative techniques, confirming the prevalent stereotype.

What about the Asian contribution? During 1991-96, compared with the 79% of research in DE globally, Asia's contribution was 21%. During 2000-08, while the rest of the world registered nearly 89%, Asia's contribution came down to just 11%. What could be the reasons for this?

This slide shows that Asia's contribution, while relatively minimal as compared to the rest of the world, drops even further. On the one hand, we've seen a phenomenal growth in ODL in Asia, on the other we find that the research output is shrinking. Is this due to language, since we are considering research in English? Or is that there is a growing distinction between the institutions that teach and the institutions which focus primarily on research?

India has 14 public open universities—one national and thirteen state open universities and one private open university and a over 250 dual-mode institutions, with a reasonably large number of people, about 18% , familiar with English. What is the contribution to DE research? As Sanjaya Mishra points out, that with the exception of the Asian Journal of Distance Education, the number of publications from India has been less than 10 in international journals over several years.

What kind of DE research do we find in India? According to Panda et al, two thirds are project-oriented and one third relates to degrees. Most of it seems to be descriptive, lacking theoretical underpinning and rigour.

Colin Latchem and Insung Jung reviewed the AAOU proceedings during 2000-06 and found that 60% of the papers were descriptive and only 3% devoted to experimental studies. How can this lead to innovation? Clearly there is a need to review our approach to research.

No discussion of trends in ODL research today can be complete without a reference to Open Access policies and practices. Open Access means that a user is able to copy, use and distribute a piece of research with proper attribution of authorship. This is beginning to gain ground and in 2013, a European Commission study found that half the new published research was now open and free. According to another 2014 study, of the 114 million publications on the web, 27 million were open access. Since this is a growing trend, the DE research community may consider using the open access option.

This Slide gives you a range of open access policies from the US, UK and the European Commission and this is a useful resource for institutions wishing to adopt this approach..

Let us now turn to three key areas of research that we as a distance education community could consider going forward. The first is the emerging area of OER and MOOCs, the second is the issue of costs and the third is how we can harness ODL for achieving development goals.

When Borje Holmberg or Otto Peters were writing, there was no sign of these two developments which have emerged in recent times—Open Education Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). In both cases, ODL institutions did not take the initiative to drive these developments. The majority of ODL institutions are yet to adopt appropriate and domesticate OER or MOOCs.

Rice University led the way with its OER initiative Connexions and MIT followed soon after with the Open Courseware Initiative. OER with its emphasis on openness and sharing have a very close alignment with the philosophy of open universities and yet the opportunity was taken by research universities.

Similarly MOOCs, a form of distance learning, originated from research universities like Stanford, MIT etc. Among the big league players like Coursera, Udacity and edX, FutureLearn is an initiative launched by the Open University UK. The FutureLearn, a private company of the OU UK is a consortium of 38 institutions which offers 29 courses which have attracted over 750,000 students worldwide. The Open University of Japan has taken a leadership role in Asia.

However, ODL institutions can seize the opportunity of conducting research in both these areas building on their expertise and experience. For example, the use of free quality content or OER can help save both time and money for DE institutions. But we would need research on the quality of repurposed content, on whether the use of OER can reduce the costs of DE delivery and how we can enlarge the circle by involving more stakeholders.

Similarly, we could study whether MOOCs have the potential to help us to reach the unreached; whether the use of Learning Analytics can actually improve outcomes and how these technologies are changing pedagogic practice. This is not an exhaustive list but could be a useful starting point.

The second major issue is the costs of ODL. Led by the World Bank, there was a great deal of discussion on the costs of ODL in the 1980's when countries were borrowing money to establish open universities.

With the rise of mega universities, the question of economies of scale began to emerge. In this 2004 study of mega-universities, we find that while it cost CCRTVU 40% of what a student would normally pay in another university in China, an IGNOU student costs only 35%. The percentage drops to 22 when it comes to Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan.

One of the challenges of Distance Education is convincing various stakeholders regarding the viability and feasibility of distance learning. There are very few research studies which bring out the comparative advantages of ODL in terms of economic and social outcomes. This study in Malaysia shows that the distance education and other non-conventional education both by the public as well as the private sector brings good returns on investment to the learners. Such findings will help convince more governments to implement ODL and more learners about the credibility of the system.

Another related area is the link between research, the university and industry? Are ODL institutions playing a role in forging these links? What do we know about the benefits? The South African study shows that ODL institution and industry collaboration is weak due to stakeholder's attitudes, inexperience and lack of government policies.

The third area of research could be how ODL can be used to accelerate progress towards achieving development goals. ODL started out by bringing schooling to children in the Australian outback or the Canadian prairies. It also provided opportunities for adult education. With its slogan of 'Learning for Development', COL promotes the use of ODL not just for the formal sector but for non-formal and informal learning for development.

As a recent report points out that there are very few studies on the impact ODL or MOOCs have had on development.

As you know, next year the current Millennium Development Goals will come to a close. Another set of 'Sustainable Development Goals' will be adopted by the international community. If we review some of the sustainable development goals identified by the UN High Level panel, we find that these relate to ending poverty, empowering girls and women, providing quality education and lifelong learning and ensuring that people lead healthy lives and have the opportunities for livelihoods. How can we promote learning that leads to development and helps people generate livelihoods? In which ways can ODL help?

Similarly, UNESCO's post-2015 education agenda calls for equitable and quality lifelong learning for all by 2030. Brick and mortar solutions will not be enough. How can we contribute to global efforts by promoting the use of distance learning and technologies to accelerate the achievement of the proposed targets?

The Commonwealth inter-ministerial working group has proposed access, quality and equity as the three overarching goals of education. There are still 23.3 million children out of primary school in the Commonwealth, and 1.6 million additional teachers are required globally if Universal Primary Education is to be achieved by 2015. Can ODL help us scale up access to education and training?

The area of research where we lack data is non-formal learning. How can we use distance education and technology for skills development leading to livelihoods? Such evidence would help policy makers adopt cost-effective approaches to cater to the training needs of their citizens.

But what is it that holds back DE institutions from becoming major players in research? Where are the missing links?

Let us just take up four barriers that are often cited as reasons. The first is that open and distance learning institutions have a social mission so their priority is equity rather than research. The second is the lack of funds for research. The third is inadequate capacity or opportunities for training in research and finally inadequate dissemination channels.

If we take an excerpt from the mission statement of the Open University UK, we find that it foreground both social justice and academic research as their priority.

Similarly, if you look at the mission statement of IGNOU, you will find a clear reference to taking education to the unreached and to strive towards research and development. This means

that there is no contradiction between the commitment to a social mission and to a focus on research. In fact both must go hand in hand—but where did we miss out as the DE community?

Regarding the issue of lack of funds for research, we find that IGNOU supported 68 minor and major projects at a cost of about Rs 5 million and only 38 of these were completed. Often lack of time is cited as the reason by faculty for not applying for the various grants and funds available within institutions.

What about research capacity? There are several free resources available to train young faculty members. One such is the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training or PREST materials developed by COL and available free on our website.

COL supports a programme of Chairs for research in ODL and OER and these are often implemented jointly with UNESCO. Some of these Chairs are established in UWI, Barbados, NOUN, Athabasca University, Canada, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand, Mzuzu University, Malawi and the Open University of Tanzania.

COL also offers Excellence in Distance Education Awards during its triennial conferences—these are meant for institutions, DE materials, the use of OER and for DE learners.

The AAOU also has several initiatives to promote research—these are the Best Paper, young innovator and Best Practice awards. There are the AAOU exchange programmes for supporting young or mid-career researchers.

The slide shows that even if we provide all facilities and infrastructure, without proper mentoring, all the inputs will be useless. Panda suggests that research capacity could be built through a mentoring relationship which can either be face to face or at a distance.

Do we have a dearth of dissemination channels? There are several journals within Asia. These are the AAOU Journal, the ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning, the Asian and Indian Journals of Distance education, Distance Education in China.

COL has launched an online Journal of Learning for Development which provides a forum for the publication of research with a focus on innovation in learning, and its contribution to development. It welcomes articles on theory, policy and practice.

Another dissemination channels is conferences such as these annual AAOU events as well as COL's Pan Commonwealth Forums which happen once every three years. The last one was organized in collaboration with the National Open University in Nigeria in Abuja. The eight PCF will be organized in partnership with the Open University of Malaysia and will be held in Kuala Lumpur in 2016. COL's objective is to promote research to improve the quality of ODL and to train a cadre of future leaders to take forward the baton from the previous generation of gurus and stalwarts.

Let us review the linkages affecting research and policy as depicted in this chart. The opportunity and motivations of the researchers can influence the quality of the research. The commitment of

the researchers and the quality of research, if they are financially feasible and economically viable, can provide a model to influence policy and outcomes.

To sum up this section, it is clear that ODL institutions are committed to research, do invest funds in research activities and offer both capacity building opportunities and dissemination channels for research. Yet the missing link seems to be the gap between research and action. For example, how relevant is the research we conduct to our day to day operations? Does our research on new pedagogies influence the way we format content? Or how we provide tutorial support? Or do we continue to do what we've always done? And research and action continue to exist in separate worlds which often do not meet.

The twain can meet if there is a culture of research within our institutions.

If you look at the Scimago Institutions Rankings 2014, you will find that out of the 4851 ranked institutions, only four open universities featured in the rankings. The Open University UK ranked 780 in terms of research output, followed by the Open University of the Netherlands at 2419. The Open University of Israel comes at 2598 and the Hellenic Open University is ranked 2751. The ranking improves substantially when the criteria of innovations and web visibility is applied. Asian open universities are conspicuous by their absence. So the focus on research at this year's AAOU is very timely and will hopefully result in a call to action.

What can we learn from the industry? In this study carried out to determine what factors contribute to research and development in industry, managers believed that research and innovation is driven primarily by the corporate culture of an organization. How do we define this enabling corporate culture? This means staff have autonomy and freedom, there is a system of recognition and rewards in place and a culture where failure is not a stigma but is accepted as a lesson learned. The junior staff had a slightly different perspective on what drives research and innovation. They believed that research and innovation depended largely on the right people. So we find the importance of people and an institutional culture as critical to driving ODL research.

In a recent paper, Bland et al identify 15 institutional characteristics that promote research in German institutions. These sum up what we have already discussed: careful recruitment and selection of the right people, clear goals, an emphasis on research within the institution, adequate resources, and mentoring.

In short the German recipe for building an institutional culture of research emphasises the importance of collegiality, where people can test out their out-of-the-box thinking without the fear of being ridiculed. It means that staff have enough time earmarked for research rather than having to fit it in within over-committed teaching schedules. It also means that each institution needs to identify and build on existing strengths.

In conclusion, a culture of research is an institutional culture that does three things: fosters an environment of creativity and innovation; values and rewards research and uses the research to inform both policy and practice towards continuous improvement.

Thank you for your kind attention.

