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Researching Open and Distance Learning in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Open and distance learning (ODL) has been considered the most powerful change in the area of education. In the global setting, ODL is considered a powerful tool to answer to various educational problems in many countries. In Southeast Asia where resources in the form of physical educational infrastructure and academic expertise are in relatively short supply, while the need for access to quality education is increasing, ODL has a special appeal. The rapid growth of ODL has also been substantiated by the growth of information and communication technology (ICT).

The practice of ODL has been proven to be challenging for many parties and governments involved. It requires integrated and coherent decision making, planning, and action based on sound and profound understanding of the concepts on the part of individuals, groups, and governments within our regions. With the rapid spread of ODL, the practice of ODL has outpaced research, especially in Southeast Asia. This paper describes trends and issues in researching ODL in Southeast Asia. A conceptual perspective as well as historical perspective are elaborated. Potential emerging issues for further research in the area of open and distance learning in Southeast Asia are also discussed.

Introduction

The most powerful winds of change in education nowadays have been propelled by the open and distance learning (ODL) concepts. Within the context of global knowledge society, ODL is a considerably powerful tool to answer to various educational problems in many countries and many educational settings. The rapid growth of ODL has been much substantiated by the growth of information and communication technology (ICT). The latter has propagated many conventional face-to-face education institutions to engage in an ODL system via the use of ICT.

While ODL in the world has reached more than a century of history, ODL in Southeast Asia (SEA) was marked by the establishment of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University – the oldest open university in Southeast Asia, in late 1970s. Although some countries in Southeast Asia have the history of more than five decades of implementation of ODL, the concepts of ODL gained its popularity at the end of 1970s during the baby boom era, at the same time as the establishment of the Open University of the United Kingdom in Europe.

With the rapid spread of ODL, the practice of ODL has outpaced research, especially in Southeast Asia. This paper describes trends and issues in researching ODL in Southeast Asia. Conceptual and historical perspectives are provided, as well as potential emerging issues for further research. Much of the content of this article is based on the study by SEAMOLEC: ODL Profile in Southeast Asian Countries – a compilation of writings by SEAMOLEC Governing Board Members from 10 countries in Southeast Asia.

Concept of ODL and Its Development

In its most basic form, ODL is characterized by a learning situation in which teacher and learner are physically separated across time and space, freedom from the constraints of time and place of study, and lifelong learning. As a student-centered program, ODL accommodates the lives and lifestyles of students who have jobs and families, but wishes to pursue education without loosing opportunity cost. ODL allows any student a unique opportunity to pursue a quality education, live at home, maintain a career and enjoy the convenience of anywhere, anytime learning.

Communication between teacher/tutor and learner is non-contagious and mediated by some forms of technology, i.e., multimedia learning package which is systematically designed and produced. In the earliest form of distance education, the correspondence model, the mediating technology was print- and mail-based, which was produced massively to achieve economies of scale. The correspondence model gives special emphasis on opening up wider access to quality education at a given time.

In addition to access, the issue of equity to quality education is another underlying principle of ODL. Since the availability and frequency of two ways interaction through various mediated format between students and tutors, students and students, and students and institutions are required to determine the quality of learning experience, the interaction and social dialogues in learning process to assure quality education becomes highly important. To accommodate such a requirement, ODL benefit most from the more recent interactive technologies, i.e., audio conferencing, videoconferencing, computer-mediated

conferencing, computer mediated communication, internet based resources and e-learning. Through such a two ways mediated interaction, the psychological distance and communication barriers in distance learning can be minimized.

In comparison with face-to-face learning, which depends highly on the availability of instructors/teachers/lecturers, and employs media and technology as instructional and presentation media, the use of ICT (in its various forms) as the main delivery technology in ODL is unavoidable. The trends in the use of intelligent flexible learning technology in ODL has added value to the characteristics of ODL to become a flexible learning system providing access to quality education to anybody, anywhere and anytime. That is, it enables lifelong education to take place.

In 2001, Taylor has indicated the growth of ODL from its first generation to its fifth generation. According to Taylor (2001), correspondence model of ODL has been the first generation of ODL, followed by the multimedia model, the telelearning model, the flexible learning model (using the computer based communication), and the intelligent flexible learning model (using the e-learning). Recently, the development of ODL has moved into its sixth generation, i.e., the mobile learning model. However for many ODL practices in SEA, the print media remains the most predominant communication tool between distance educators and their students.

Why ODL in SEA?

ODL has a special appeal to Southeast Asian countries, where resources in the form of physical educational infrastructure and

academic expertise are in relatively short supply, while the need for access to quality education is increasing because of increasing population. In Indonesia, the issue of access and equity of education underlies the establishment of Universitas Terbuka (UT), an open learning university offering educational programs at a distance to people of Indonesia. The number of students enrolled in UT has led UT to become one of the mega universities in the world. The same issues also apply to the establishment of STOU, Thailand.

The need for mass and rapid education for teachers has been the most prevalent issue for Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam to embark in ODL. Scarcity of teachers as well as the need for mass teachers upgrading were problems faced by many countries in SEA. ODL in this case is seen as the most feasible means in solving such an educational problem. Via distributed learning as one of the characteristics of ODL, teachers can be upgraded without leaving their teaching jobs. Thus, quality and standardized education can be offered across geographical areas at a rapid time, and with relative efficiency.

For other countries, i.e., Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, the need to extend quality education at tertiary level, within the framework of the nation's human resources development, has been the main issue to undertake ODL. The same issue also applies for Malaysia and Philippines, but at the graduate level, mainly for human resources quality improvement. This is not because they are lacking tertiary education, but more for extending educational services to improve and enhance of their working force.

More advanced issues can be found for Singapore and Brunei Darussalam as a reason for their engagement in ODL. As a matter of fact, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam do not need to develop ODL, since they have relatively adequate education system to fulfill

the needs of their own people. Further, they do not have the need to increase their educational services in regard to geographical areas and population increase. In both cases, transborder education has been the main propelling issue, where education is more of a commercial commodity to be marketed to students (as customers) from many SEA countries. Thus, ODL has served as the feasible delivery mechanism to bring quality (foreign) education to SEA via Singapore and or Brunei Darussalam.

The Role of Government in ODL

Most ODL in SEA are Government funded, except in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. This situation indicates that ODL has been mainly government effort in overcoming educational problems in the respective country. In Thailand, the King of Thailand has provided fund for distance education, at the early years of STOU, and to the Distance Education Foundation, a non-formal open and distance schooling via educational television in Thailand.

In Indonesia, Vietnam and Philippines, ODL institution has been one of the many public/state owned/government educational institutions. In their early development this condition has led to an issue of incompatibility with "conventional face-to-face educational organization". Later, the Government as well as the ODL institution refines their organizational structure to best suit the nature and characteristics of ODL. In Myanmar, the establishment of the University of Distance Education in Yangon has also been a government effort to answer the challenges of growing educational needs in the country.

In Lao PDR and Cambodia, ODL is in its early stages of development. It has not been developed into an institution of its own, but it is a center under an existing university or the ministry of education. An open learning offering via extensive use of ICT, however, has been successfully introduced in Cambodia through *the Community Information Center's* project for *Provincial Business Education* to expand the reach of educational opportunities in higher education in support of economic and social development (*Abdon, Ninomiya, & Raab, 2007*). Lao PDR has made an effort in establishing an ODL institution of its own. Its feasibility study was facilitated by SEAMOLEC and UNESCO, the preparatory work at present is facilitated by the STOU.

The profound role of the Government in ODL indicates the nature of ODL in many SEA countries, i.e., in carrying social function of the Government to offer quality education for all, as well as to offer education opportunities to people continuously seeking education who might otherwise not be able to avail themselves of such an opportunity. Thus, in many SEA countries, ODL is a non-profit organization, funded mostly by the Government (i.e., Government's subsidy is high), for the purpose of opening access and equity to quality education across the nation.

For Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, nevertheless, the role of Government in ODL is minimal. In Malaysia, some public universities operate an open and distance education unit as a means of extending educational services for the local students. University of Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang has been the first university to practice this model. However, the establishment of University of Tun Abdurazak (UNITAR), Open University of Malaysia (OUM), and Wawasan Open University

(WOU) are purely private effort. In Singapore, the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM) is a private institution. Other than SIM, some foreign universities from Europe, US, and Australia opening their branches in Singapore and practicing ODL to serve SEA students are private universities. Public universities in Singapore: National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technology University, and Institute of Technology Education (Polytechnic), are practicing open learning merely via extensive use of ICT in their campuses. In Brunei Darussalam, except for public universities practicing open learning and foreign universities offering ODL services, there is no ODL institution available.

The government also determines the education fee that students have to pay to get access to ODL. The more extensive the role of the government, the least expensive the fee. The less extensive the role of the government, the ODL resembles a private business, therefore students have to pay more.

Policy and Regulations

Most countries in SEA at present have designated policies and or regulations regarding the practice of ODL. The level of policies and or regulations range from national law down to technical regulations, implemented and monitored by the relevant unit. The following table indicates the policies and regulations of 10 countries in SEA regarding ODL.

Table:
Policy and Regulations Regarding ODL in SEA Countries

1.	**Brunei Darussalam** National Accreditation Council (BDNAC): QA for securing consumer protections of ODL offered by foreign institutions of higher learning.
2.	**Cambodia**: still at the beginning - two committees were established since 1995: Modular Writing Committee and Tutorial Committee for Distance Education (for teachers)
3.	**ODL in Indonesia** is supported by the GOI with a Law on National Education System No.20/2003
4.	**Lao PDR**: still at the beginning – to answer EFA and shortage of capacity in conventional universities – a center under a university.
5.	**Malaysia**: Higher Education Act 1997
6.	**Myanmar**: the establishment of University of Distance Education by the Government in 1992
7.	**Philippines**: policy at the national level from the Commission on Higher Education (2001)
8.	**Singapore**: Transborder Education (Foreign universities that offer their external degree programs (EDP) via local agents)
9.	**Thailand**: new regulations on ODL after National Education Act of 1999
10.	**Vietnam**: The Prime Minister's Direction (Dec. 2001): Development of ODL should be regarded as a measure to mobilize the whole country to build a learning society

It is clear that Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have secured policies on ODL at the national level. However, Cambodia and Lao PDR. at present have not yet had any laws regarding ODL. ODL is still at the beginning to catch attention of the government in Cambodia and Lao PDR. Singapore and Brunei Darussalam have their own version of policies on ODL, especially on ODL as a transborder education process.

ODL Research

Most seminal work of research in ODL in the world have been the works by Borje Holmberg since early 1980s. Until then, little research has been done on open and distance learning, and what was written according Holmberg (2006) mainly consisted of case studies and more or less anecdotal material. Nevertheless, the situation is changing entirely at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century, when research surveys and bibliographies published during the last two decades testify to much thorough and widely spread research activities in the field (*Holmberg, 2006*).

In general, according to *Holmberg (2006)*, the area of research in ODL can be divided into two broad categories, one emphasizing endogenous factors, i.e., concerns within the work done within ODL (methods, media, other components of ODL), the other studying its economic, technological, demographic, cultural, political and social context. Specifically, there are fifteen areas of study within ODL as identified by Holmberg in 1982:

1. General analyses of distance education, philosophy, and theory.
2. Studies of student bodies and students' motivation.
3. Course planning and study objectives.
4. Course development.
5. Media.
6. Non-contiguous tutorial two-way communication.
7. Face-to-face sessions.
8. Counseling.
9. Institutional planning, organization, and administration.
10. Economics of distance education.
11. Evaluation.
12. History of distance education.

13. Distance education in developing countries.
14. Guidelines for distance educators.
15. Research on research.

In Asia, much of the research and studies in ODL have been channeled through the AAOU annual conferences which was first convened in 1987, including studies in ODL in Southeast Asia. Since there has not been a special forum dedicated for ODL in SEA, many ODL scholars and researchers from SEA countries join the AAOU conferences. The theme of each conference indicates the most-concerned issues during the period of time. Those themes include Open Universities of Asia: Problems and Prospects; Interactive Communication in Distance Education; Face-to-face Components in Distance Education.

Role of Open Universities in Promoting Education for All; Economics of Distance Education; Structure and Management of Open Learning Systems; Globalised and Cooperative Distance Learning; Innovations in Distance and Open Learning; Quality Assurance in Distance and Open Learning; The Asian Distance Learner: Open and Distance Education Systems and Models Facing 21st Century's Information and Learning Societies; Open and Distance Learning: Ideology, Pedagogy and Technology; Access & Equity: Challenges for Open and Distance Learning; Open & Distance Learning in the Digital Era: Towards a Lifelong Learning Society; Networking and Partnership for Strengthening Collaborative e-Education Programs for the Asian Community; Quality Education for All: New Missions and Challenges Facing Open Universities; Building Knowledge-Based Society through Open and Distance; Reflections on and Future Prospects for Choice and Use of New Technologies in ODL-Strategies; Cost-Effectiveness and Impacts; Empowering Asia through Partnerships in Open and Distance Education.

The richness of those themes indicates that most of the areas of research in ODL have been discussed in the AAOU conferences. Nevertheless, based on those studies, ODL has not emerged as a field of study in Asia until 2006, when UP Open University offers a master degree in the field of distance education and technology. Meanwhile, in Europe as well as US and Australia, the field of distance education has turned into a discipline by itself – based on the numerous research done in the field, since 1986 (*Holmberg, 2006*).

In studying the profile of ODL in SEA, some issues are emerging as follows:

1. Most ODL institutions have indicated their sources of funds, however, a thorough study of the economics of ODL has not yet been done. In many cases governments are still questioning as to the economic value of ODL as educational choice in the country. The high capital investment at the beginning of establishment of ODL is sometimes surprising to many governments who rely on the promise of "low cost of ODL".

   Related to the issue of economic value, the sustainability of ODL in many SEA countries is also interesting to study. In the past, most ODL received strong support from the governments. At recent years, competition among educational institutions is inevitable, yet most governments in SEA is moving toward autonomous management of educational institution. How can, ODL institutions sustain itself without subsidies from the government? Will the ODL institutions maintain their social function for the government? Or will it be turning into a privatized educational institution, just like other educational institutions? Certainly, ODL is not a low cost choice in education, thus how

will the expenses be shared? Who will pay and who will gain? (*Daniels, 1993*)

2. In the global competition era, quality assurance becomes one strong emerging issue in ODL in SEA. How will an ODL institution assure its quality to its stakeholders? Although most ODL institutions in SEA acknowledge the importance of QA, the issue remains vague to many parties. The steps, the procedures, the standard, and indicators are not clear to many ODL educators. Jung (2007) further asserts that with the trends of transborder education across countries in SEA, the issue of quality and quality assurance (QA) has become more pressing than ever before. While a quality culture has been emerging in some ODL institutions, in many ODL institutions it is not yet fully integrated into the larger university policy and performance framework.

Accreditation of the quality of ODL institution is also another pressing issue. Many ODL institutions in Asia, according to *Jung (2007)* have developed and implemented QA standards and procedures in key areas of distance education activities, even some have institutionalized a central QA unit. The capacity-building efforts made by many ODL institutions indicate the high concern of quality assurance. Further, most of the institutions have been seeking to obtain national as well as international recognition as high quality DE providers. At this moment, ICDE and ISO are among the most common accreditation agencies known by many ODL institutions in SEA. Is there any need for common quality benchmark and accreditation for ODL institutions in SEA?

3. Transborder education (TBE) has been emerging as one of the reflections of globalization of education. This development poses new challenges at a time when the government of a country is no longer the sole provider of education. Such challenges not only address issues of access, equity, intellectual property, and quality, but also those of national sovereignty and cultural diversity (*Brodjonegoro, 2006*). The issue of quality assurance and accreditation of ODL programs is one of the many issues TBE has brought about. Other issues include the strategies of bridging the sending institutions and receiving institutions or countries regarding the provision and dissemination of reliable information, the development of transborder courses or study programs, and the recognition of qualifications in labor markets and among professional bodies across nations.

4. ICT has been a major contributor to the dramatic transformation of ODL in Asia, according to *Jung (2007)*. This condition is also generalizable to the situation of ODL in SEA. The internet penetration has been high in many aspects, and in SEA countries, the largest penetration of internet users is in Singapore. With the development of ICT in the region, ODL institutions in SEA have started their efforts in adopting ICT to support supplementary modes of instruction and, more importantly, as a means of improving student services and providing interactions. The issues of appropriate adoption of ICT for delivering ODL and enhancing ODL services is one among many issues regarding the influence of ICT in ODL institutions in SEA. Other issues include the content development versus infrastructure and technological development, management of change in conventional institutions adopting ICT to offer ODL services, new educational opportunities open by the adoption of ICT, and digital devices.

Further along the issues emerging due to the strong influence of ICT have included the new type of learning – blended learning or hybrid learning, the ICT-based networking in SEA educational institutions (which is not limited to ODL institutions, a.o. Asian University Network, School on Internet, GDLN). The newest emerging issue in the area of ICT influences has been the mobile learning. The use of wireless, mobile, portable, and handheld devices are gradually increasing and diversifying across higher education, and across both the developed and developing worlds. It is gradually moving from small-scale, short-term trials to larger more sustained and blended deployment (*Traxler, 2007*). In SEA ODL institutions, Librero from the UPOU has initiated investigation toward the use of mobile learning in ODL setting under IDRC project (ICT4D, 2006). As handheld devices and mobile phones become more popular in SEA community, what will be the possibility of mobile learning to take place as one of delivery alternatives in ODL setting?

5. Along with the development of ICT, there is at present a movement to provide open educational resources available through internet. By 2004 OER was defined to include (*Johnstone, 2005*):
   - Learning resources: courseware, content modules, learning objects, learner-support and assessment tools, on-line learning communities
   - Resources to support teachers: tools for teachers and support materials to enable them to create, adapt, and use OER, as well as training materials for teachers and other teaching tools
   - Resources to assure the quality of education and educational practices.

MIT in US (2001) has been the pioneer of OER; later other European and US ODL institutions are joining the bandwagon on this OER movement. Several issues emerging regarding this OER movement as applied to SEA, i.e., Who is willing to develop OER and make them available in the web and accessible to SEA community to be able to use them? How about the intellectual property issues? Does "open" educational resources means "free" educational resources? Any common grounds for the sharing, distribution, and adaptation, and further interoperability? Any problems with language diversity of SEA? How about sustainability of the OER movement?

6. Along with all the changes, there are some pedagogical issues of ODL as well. Especially the emerging e-Learning, which is seen 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. Two-way interactive course, problem-based, case-based, and or resource-based learning are blooming. Many conventional universities have been embracing ODL and or e-learning programs, via their dual modes delivery. However, Jung (2007) asserts that 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.

In addition to the above-mentioned issues, there are also issues in conducting research in ODL itself. Many studies in ODL in SEA have been individual scholarly research and one shot case in nature. Institutional research and longitudinal research are rarely carried out due to many factors. Further, not many of those studies have been well documented or disseminated across

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ODL institutions in SEA countries. The important question then is: what will be the importance of research in ODL? How does research in ODL influence ODL practices and inform ODL policy in SEA?

Remarks

New development will come along at high speed and certainly will influence our field of ODL. While there are some questions remaining unanswered, new challenges will be posed by the new development. Research – as in many other fields – will not give answers to all the issues emerging in our path of practice, but the challenges for research, especially in the area of ODL, are too valuable to be neglected. It's not a one shot case endeavor, it is a life-long journey for those practitioners and researchers in ODL. The most rewarding of research is not "finding out" but more where results of studies can serve as sound foundations of policy or decision making regarding the ODL practices in our region.

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