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Policy and Practice in Asian Distance Education

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Politically and economically, the introduction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the Asian countries stems from very different needs. The desire to meet democratic ideals of education for all without compromising on quality is probably the strongest reason for its popularity in the Asian countries. Informatively and interestingly presented, the book is the outcome of a project which is trail-blazing as a collaborative PANDora research and development initiative between 24 ODL institutions of 13 Asian countries that covered three years. Nine themes, which range from accessibility, acceptance and effects of Distance Learning Technologies (DLT) to e-assessment methods and models for student evaluation and a repository of Re-usable Learning Objects, were selected for the research studies.

The book is in five sections or modules comprised of 23 chapters. Its modular design allows for individual chapters to be modified or updated or used as stand-alone content according to the need of the reader. It is perhaps one of the first comprehensive books on distance education in Asia. It would be a valuable addition to any institutional library or research center for its policy makers and researchers. It is also available/accessible through the PANDora network's open resources website for use in its English version or for translation into other languages. Describing the remarkable venture in simple and readable style, the articles are practical and down-to-earth in locating their debate in Asian contexts.

All the writers are conscious of the socio-cultural and economic environment in Asian countries and adopt a realistic approach to technology use with a clear understanding of the danger of the 'digital divide'. Given the concerns of Asian countries for large-scale educational provision and relatively lesser access to the latest technologies (both physically and psychologically) realistic practical experiences, such as the ones shared in this book, bear great significance. What a reader in India would expect, however, in the light of the fact that the country has 14 open universities and more than 200 distance teaching institutions, is that some more case studies from India had been included.

The first chapter is an excellent and succinct account of the conceptual development of distance education as an institution distinct from face-to-face offerings.

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(Correspondence education does not seem to have been taken into account in the description though it is referred to in later chapters.) Later articles also show evidence as to how different Asian institutions have modified the concepts to suit local needs and contexts. Having started with the use of mass produced standardized materials, ODL today has moved towards individualized and interactive learning strategies by the deployment of technology. The concise introductory chapter covers discussion of two-way communication, guided didactic conversation, organized learner support services that provide the human touch, and the need to reduce transactional distance by use of technology. The important difference of shift in priorities of educational institutions of post-industrial society from creating a skilled labor force to improving the quality of human lives is brought out well. Education focuses more on 'self-realization' and fulfillment of personal needs now says the author (p. 6). Table 1.1 on p. 8, shows the world's 20 largest mega universities (Source Wikipedia-July 2010) but does not distinguish between single mode and dual mode institutions (e.g., open universities and conventional universities) such as Delhi University or Osmania University—a difference that has great relevance in most Indian contexts where the reasons and purposes for the launch of distance programs in each is entirely different. On p. 9 however, without making clear the systemic difference between the two, the author goes on to draw a comparison between single mode and dual mode institutions.

"The high costs of technology, accessibility and capability, technical support, regulatory applications and political barriers may take many years to get resolved" (p. 10) says the author. In India, with the National Technology Mission well underway, hopefully the process will be speeded up.

Chapter 2 reports a very interesting case study of financial management at Universitas Terbuka (UT-Open University of Indonesia with illustrative data and tables and charts) that shows how a typical ODL institution functions. It classifies the costs in DE/ODL showing how budget planning follows activity-based costing. While the grouping of facilities may vary from institution to institution, the discussion would provide substantial guidance to policy makers and planners about financial management in ODL.

Chapter 3 is of general informative value for researchers and for newcomers to distance education as it has collated and given details of international and regional bodies, associations and partnerships that promote and support ODL. Chapter 4 is again on the economic aspect of distance education—cost effectiveness and empirical studies of educational practices. It discusses various types of techniques for measuring educational effectiveness empirically by specific reference to constant cost, least cost and objective level analysis. Cost Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) and Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) are well-described (pp. 44-45) for a researcher to make a comparative estimate of alternatives and their costs. CBA estimates probable costs of outcomes and their 'currency' values. The chapter has great value for policy makers to take decisions about costs and for encouraging/commissioning specific research studies on their own institutions.

Quality assurance as a standard reflexive model and its role in ensuring increasingly high standards in ODL is the theme of Chapter 5. Quality and high standards ensure 'brand value' for any ODL institution. The rapid growth in popularity of ODL as a convenient educational option brings with it serious concerns about the quality of the course offerings it makes and the efficacy of its practices. While quality is perceived as a continual process of reflection combined with external evaluation to ensure that set standards are reached in the outcomes, and the confidence of the users is maintained, the PDCA (Plan Do Check Act) approach is advocated. Describing the 'best practice' of Universitas Terbuka (UT-Open University of Indonesia) in some detail, the author of the chapter, Belawati shows how a vital aspect of distance learning—quality, can be managed by self-evaluation and reflective practices. The case study reveals that critical evaluation has enhanced motivation and in turn shown positive change in performance and efficiency.

The next theme taken up for discussion is student assessment. Assessment of learning through the distance mode especially if it includes formative and summative evaluation can pose challenges for educational providers. The procedures for student assessment in distance education, while they may appear to be like those in conventional face-to-face education, need to have in place greater security measures to protect the system's integrity. Generally, as is the case at Universitas Terbuka, both formative and summative evaluations in slightly varying proportions of marking or grading are used.

E-assessment experiences in Pakistani educational institutions are discussed next. The case study describes the relatively comprehensive e-assessment system used at Virtual University of Pakistan. In the concluding Chapter of Section 2, there is a logical progression to the topic of conducting and reporting of Distance Education Evaluations.

Section 3 has five chapters which discuss distance teaching and technology use ranging from print media to SMS materials. Three chapters in the next section are focused on the related themes of design of instructional material and criteria to be borne in mind while developing materials for adult learners. The history of distance education media usage is once again an interesting succinct overview that focuses on new developments across the world but grounds the discussion in the Asian perspective by citing references to equally imaginative means of communication during the early times. The illustrative comparisons draw on histories of India, Russia and China.

Under the heading "Print and Audio Production", the next chapter outlines the process of designing and production of distance learning materials. The example of Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka where limited resources are employed for accessibility and high quality DE delivery is elucidated. Different video formats and stages of production are described in the next chapter. On-line Learning Management Systems (LMS) are a realistic and practicable options for course delivery and a PANDora project

was conducted to evaluate different LMS products. The first evaluation of an Asia-based study of Open-Source Software (OSS)—the use of Moodle LMS at the Health Sciences University of Mongolia is reported in chapter 12. The evaluation criteria include cost to institution and user, complexity, control, clarity, and common technical framework. An interesting theme discussed in chapter 13 is production of SMS material which can be automated with minimal human intervention.

The next section is about the principles of distance education implementation. As in some of the earlier chapters, it is argued that most Asian countries may not be ready for the new technologies like world-wide web (www) and Internet, hence the low cost technologies with greater accessibility such as radio, TV and cell phones have larger scope. “It is possible that developing countries will unwisely follow the example of First world educational institutions in abandoning traditional media, such as radio and television though these technologies are more widely accessible than the Internet and www in all parts of the world.” (p. 155). Chapters 15 and 16 are complementary and deal with the theoretical and practical elements of course design for adult learners. The examples are drawn from Asia’s newest Open University, the Wawasan Open University (WOU), Malaysia. For developing its learning materials, WOU uses two methods. The first is identification of a textbook ‘off the shelf’ and supplementing it with a ‘wrap-around’ study guide that includes self-assessment tests and possible answers. The second is the creation of a fully self-contained package with content, enrichment material, self-assessment tests, and responses to them. Additional reading materials (journal articles, etc.), are provided as ‘readers’. The University has begun with a primary focus on print materials but has the necessary flexibility to scale up. “At some point in the future, ‘morphing’ into a totally virtual style of learning is a real possibility” (p. 179) says the author.

The last chapter in the section presents an Outcome Mapping framework which is intended for identifying gender and sensitivity issues in project planning, monitoring and evaluation. Though there is a detailed description of the framework and its potential strengths, a report of its actual functioning would have made the approach more comprehensible.

Section 5 is, in some respects, the most interesting, giving the case studies of six open universities: (1) China Open University, (2) Korea National Open University, (3) Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, (4) Thailand, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia Open University, (5) Virtual University of Pakistan, and (6) Wawasan Open University (WOU). They act as models of a range of ways in which learning can be provided in Asian contexts and a rich source of factual information.

The book is a valuable addition to ODL literature for both its theoretical approaches and the practical case studies. For a region in which education means so much this book has much to offer if policy makers can take the cue. “The 3.7 million people who

make up the Asian continent cannot get enough education and are among the most-deprived in terms of access to it” the Foreword by Tan Sri Emeritus Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan tells us. As skepticism at policy-making levels is being shed, ODL institutions have gained respectability and acceptability among general public. The value of the book is that unlike 35 years ago when the first deliberations on ODL were underway and “the praxis came from the North; today, it may not be wrong to say, as this volume demonstrates, knowledge from the South, especially Asia, is prolific and therefore, even more relevant to the book’s readers”(Foreword, xix).

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