



AAOU-2007 Conference Report

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The 21st Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities was held on Tuesday 30th and Wednesday 31st October hosted by the Open University Malaysia. The Executive Board Meeting and the following General Board Meeting of the AAOU was held on the day before the conference, on Monday the 29th. This is a brief summary of the Conference (see <http://aaou.oum.edu.my/aaou/index.php>).

This Conference was held at the new resort hotel of Putrajaya Marriott, at about 40km from downtown Kuala Lumpur, or one hour by car. The AAOU had assistant staff from the OUM to greet participants at the airport and help with transportation to their hotel, and a welcome desk was set up in the foyer, or main lobby area, for registration and information throughout the duration. The secretariat meanwhile had a nearby office in the hotel for ICT and management services. The weather was warm, with cool evening breezes.

The Conference was organised by the AAOU President Ge Daokai, of the China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU) and General-Secretary Li Yawan ; the Conference Chairperson was Professor Anuwar Ali President of the OUM, and the local Conference Director was Professor Zoraini Wati Abas of OUM. On Monday, the president Professor Daokai hosted the Executive and General Board Meetings and then hosted lunch for those Members in the Main Lobby. Monday afternoon was generally free and the formal Opening Banquet was held that evening in the hotel main ballroom. Late during dinner the guests were greatly honoured by a visit and short speech by the Minister of Higher

Education for Malaysia, and we must thank him for rushing across country to fit us into his busy tight schedule. The Conference itself was then held over the next two days with Keynote Speeches by Sir John Daniel, Professor Atwi Suparman, Professor John Leong, and then Professor Shao Nan. The 2007 Meritorious Service Award was awarded to Professor Zhang Yaoxue, past-President of CCRTVU. Overall, there were almost 300 participants (I heard 284) from more than twenty countries (I heard 23). The theme this year was 'Empowering Asia through Partnerships in Open and Distance Education'. About 50 participants were from the Universitas Terbuka Indonesia, and 25 from OUM with probably very many more as assistant staff who provided, with a smile, great help to everyone. There were 115 Papers programmed for presentation ; 26 under the sub-theme of 'Provision of Learner Support, 8 under the sub-theme of 'Theoretical and Pedagogical Models, 16 under the sub-theme of 'Assessment and Quality Assurance', 20 under the sub-theme of 'Technological Innovation for Interaction and Delivery', 2 under the sub-theme of 'Local Culture and Curricular Adaptivity', and 16 under the sub-theme of 'Management and Policy Development'. There were no Poster Presentations. Ten Papers had been pre-selected locally, and then five were chosen by an international panel of experts including Professor Asha Kanwar, Professor Nandani de Silva, and Professor Gong Xiangguo. All these five were surprisingly in the first sub-theme of 'Provision of Learning Support', and all were presented in a first parallel session on

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on Tuesday morning chaired by Professor Mansor Fadzil, Senior Vice-President of OUM. Seven Papers were programmed for that session, although one was I believe not presented. Overall it seemed about seven percent of the programmed Papers were not presented. The best paper Gold Prize was awarded to Fengyan Chang, Shuangxu Yin, Fenglong Zhang, & Dailin Liu of China Central Radio & TV University, for their Paper entitled 'Establishing a Mechanism for Collecting Feedback on the Quality of Distance Education: A Case Study in Conducting a Follow-up Survey of CCRTVU Graduates and Their Employers', the two Silver runner-up Prizes (probably of equal merit) were awarded to Wu Bing of Shanghai TV University & Teoh Ai Ping of Wawasan Open University, for their Paper entitled 'A Comparative Analysis of Learners Interaction in the Learning Management System of Shanghai TV University and Wawasan Open University, Malaysia. Does National Culture Matter?', and to Yang Xiaotang of China Central Radio & TV University, for the Paper entitled 'The Study and Practice of Web-Based Learning Assessment in Open and Distance Education'. The other two of the five short-listed Papers received Oral Praise, and were by Xiaoying Feng of Beijing Normal University, Weiyuan Zhang of the University of Hong Kong & Li Chen of Beijing Normal University, for their Paper entitled 'Use of Scaffold Strategies to Enhance Cross-regional Online Collaborative Learning : Experiences from China', and by Geetha Udayangani Kulasekara, Buddhini Gayathri Jayatilleke & Umarany Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka, for their Paper entitled 'Designing Interface for Interactive Multimedia : Learner Perceptions on the Design Features'.

Sir John Daniel, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning, gave his Keynote Address entitled 'Blending for Success in Open and Distance Education : Public / Private Partnerships ; Human and Social Capital ; Free and Copyrighted Content ; Mixing the Media'. Sir John gave a stimulating speech on the potentials being achieved and that can be achieved through partnerships along

the main theme of the conference. He noted for instance the success of the OUM, and the exciting prospects for Wawasan Open University – both of which signed a memorandum of understanding for partnership together at the conference. Sir John noted that we currently share content, and currently share learning, but that we must now look toward sharing teaching.

Professor Atwi Suparman, Rector of the Universitas Terbuka Indonesia, gave a Keynote speech entitled 'Conflicting concepts and implementation of partnership in distance education : seeking new ideas of partnership for the future'. Professor Suparman discussed the tensions that can occur in partnerships and the need therefore to clearly define the roles of each partner in order to prevent conflicts and so to build effective partnerships for open education.

Professor John C.Y. Leong, President of the Open University of Hong Kong, gave a Keynote Address review entitled 'An Update on the Characteristics of Open Universities in Asia'. Professor Leong called for research into the achievements of graduates from open universities in order to promote these educational opportunities by demonstrating their effectiveness in enhancing career and new job opportunities. A comment during question time was given by Professor Paul Kawachi that indeed this has been the case in research by Dr Ashok Gaba of STRIDE at IGNOU who recently published just such findings in the Asian Journal of Distance Education (Gaba, 2007). Indeed the topic of the Paper winning the Gold Prize Award suggested a framework for how such follow-up research can have some effect to improve open education.

Professor Shao Nan, past-President of Yunnan Radio & Television University, gave a Keynote Speech entitled 'Globalization Regionalization and Localization : The Responses and Strategies of Yunnan TV University. Professor Shao Nan advised open universities in Asia to develop their own localization in order to meet and deal with advancing globalization.

The conference hotel staff deserve some mention. They succeeded in putting out enough tables and chairs for all the mass

lunchtime sittings in the main lobby beside the Chinese restaurant on the Monday, and around the stairway in the Lower Lobby on the Tuesday and Wednesday, accommodating not only the hundreds at our conference but also their other guests. There were at least a couple of reports of confusion at the front desk attributed to miscommunications. However, the hotel executive lounge staff were excellent. The space allotted to the AAOU was too small, and this was surprising given that the Putrajaya Marriott say they have five stars. The small rooms for the parallel sessions that I attended and participated in were full, and even more participants entered and then decided to leave to find somewhere perhaps with sitting space.

In his closing Speech, Professor Ge Daokai, President of the AAOU, mentioned new challenges facing open universities in Asia – one involving intellectual property rights – echoing Sir John Daniel's (and also my own position) that legal issues in ODE are our next shared frontier to be negotiated and managed. Professor Anuwar Ali, President of OUM and Chairperson of the Conference, in his closing Speech, asked us all to share our friendship and research to take stock of our collective wisdom in Asia. Wisdom comes from experience of putting theory into practice and reflecting on this. The conference indeed as always succeeded in this call and challenge. Old friendships were renewed, and new friendships were made : and wisdom shared. The new President-Elect of the AAOU is Professor Dr Atwi Suparmman of Universitas Terbuka Indonesia, from 1st January 2008. He solemnly received the AAOU flag from out-going President Ge Daokai in the Closing Ceremony, vowing to do his best to uphold the dignity of the AAOU, and to promote the aims and interests of the AAOU, as the culmination and well-deserved job of his career.

Professor Paul Kawachi is an Individual Supporting Member on the General Board of the AAOU. The views and comments expressed here are his own, and do not reflect those of the AAOU or any other organisation or person. Email kawachi@open-ed.net

The Conference was supported by a major bank of Malaysia, secondly by the Malaysia national tourism promotion agency, and then by the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO through its Bangkok regional office. The involvement of a bank must signal some new partnership in open and distance education that may become more significant from now on. The sponsorship by the national tourism agency translated into free guidebooks and souvenirs to participants, a one-hour stopover visit for everyone on the way to the closing dinner party to do some shopping of local handicrafts and giftware, and a glamorous dance show during the closing dinner. It seemed to me that the bank building a huge new branch office on the OUM campus was probably the same as the sponsoring bank, echoing the conference theme of partnership.

I believe a hard-cover book will be published in mid-November with Papers drawn from this conference.

Next year, the 22nd AAOU Conference 2008 will be hosted by Tianjin Radio and Television University, China, on 24-26 October at the Tianjin Grand Hotel, under the theme 'The New Development, New Trends and New Missions of Open and Distance Education in Asia and the World' (<http://aaou.tjrtvu.edu.cn>). Payame Noor University, Iran, was selected and agreed to host the 23rd AAOU Conference in 2009. We look forward to visiting Payame Noor University after many years of their keen participation in the AAOU (<http://www.pnu.ac.ir>).

REFERENCES :

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