



AAOU-2012 Conference Report

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The 26th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) was held on Tuesday, 16th October, Wednesday, 17th, and Thursday, 18th, hosted by the Open University of Japan (OUJ), Chiba, Japan. The AAOU Executive Board Meeting was held in the morning on Tuesday, followed by AAOU General Body Meeting. For program details, please visit <http://www.ouj.ac.jp/>.

The conference was held at the International Conference Hall of Makuhari Messe, a large convention complex located near the headquarters of the Open University of Japan. This is the first time the AAOU conference is held in Japan. Though the decision was made two years ago by the former president of the university, Prof. Hiromitsu Ishi, the decision required reconsideration after the enormous earthquake hit Northeast Japan in March 2011 and the nuclear power plant accident followed. The current president, Prof. Yoichi Okabe, decided to carry out the plan to host AAOU2012, and the real preparation work started in summer 2011.

One of the biggest concerns of the preparation committee, for which I served as the chair, had been the strong yen. It was hoped that yen would be weakened by the time of the conference; however, yen remained very strong and it was very difficult for participants from abroad to participate in the conference at the same time it was difficult for OUJ to host the conference with the limited conference fees (the upper limit of the price has been set by AAOU Secretariat.)

Despite those hardships, the conference was a success as about 300 participants from 22 countries took part in the conference. Unfortunately this year, no Chinese delegate was present at the conference as all the registrants in China cancelled participation at the last minute. There was a total of 120 full paper presentations in from 6 to 9 concurrent sessions at the conference with few no shows.

The main theme of the conference was “Expanding the Frontiers of Knowledge through Open and Distance Learning in Changing Societies.” Under this main theme, there were eight sub-themes: (1) new trends of ODL studies and practices; (2) organizational management and institutional leadership; (3) technology-enhanced teaching and learning; (4) innovation in curriculum development and pedagogy; (5) student support and learning communities; (6) quality assurance; (7) open educational resources and ODL; and (8) crisis and risk management. The sub-theme (8) was specially created in consideration of the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake in Japan. The most popular sub-theme was (3) technology-enhanced teaching and learning on which 31 papers were presented. The second popular sub-theme was (5) student support and learning communities for which 18 papers were presented.

Of these 120 full paper presentations, six were shortlisted beforehand by the Best Paper Award Adjudication Committee. The Gold Medal for best paper was awarded to

Liew Teik Kooi, Teoh Ai Ping, and Phalachandra Bhandigadi, of Wawasan Open University & the University Science of Malaysia, for their paper entitled ‘Development of An Assessment Tool to Measure The Prior Experiential Learning of Adult Learners: The Case of Wawasan Open University’. This year there were two papers awarded each a Silver Medal. These were Young-Sook Jung Jihoon Sung, & Younghee Woo, of Korea National Open University & Sungkyul University, for their paper entitled ‘Vicarious Learning from Reading the Good Performances of Peers’ Assignments and the Tutor’s Feedback on Them in a Large Web-based Course’, and also Ishan Sudeera Abeywardena, Tham Choy Yoong, Chan Chee Seng, & Venkataraman Balaji, of Wawasan Open University, University of Malaya & the Commonwealth of Learning, for their paper entitled ‘OERScout : Autonomous Clustering of Open Educational Resources using Keyword-Document Matrix’.

In addition to all the full paper presentations in concurrent sessions, the conference had two keynote presentations and four plenary presentations. These two keynote speakers were Dr. Arne Carlsen, Director of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (Lifelong Learning: an Opportunity for All), and Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar, President and Chief Executive Officer of Commonwealth of Learning (The Dynamics of Changing Societies and the Dynamic Role of ODL in Creating the Future).

The most interesting point in Dr. Carlsen’s talk was the UNESCO guidelines for recognition and validation of formal, non-formal, and informal learning and education (RVA). It seems a major trend in today’s education to try to recognize not only the learning through formal education but also the learning made outside the formal education situations.

Prof. Kanwar emphasized the potentials of mobile technologies as a mean to reach people in developing countries for their learning in addition to the importance of open educational resources (OERs). She also touched upon the most recent phenomenon in higher education, Massive

Open Online Courses (MOOCs), as a future platform of teaching and learning.

The three plenary speakers were Prof. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, Emeritus Professor of Wawasan Open University (Building Knowledge Societies in E-Merging Asia : Is OER a Solution or Is it Wishful Thinking?); Prof. Terry Anderson, Professor of Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Centre at Athabasca University (New Pedagogies and New Technologies: Threat or Opportunity for Distance Educators?); Ms. Kumiko Bando, Director-General of the Higher Education Bureau, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (The Expectation on the Open University of Japan – from the Standpoint of Higher Education Policy); and Dr. Tian Belawati, Rector of University Terbuka (Managing Quality Assurance in a Mega University).

Let me briefly explain the gist of each of the plenary presentations. Prof. Dhanarajan presented the success of open universities in the Asian region and suggested that open universities should support the OER movement to widen access to education at all levels. Prof. Anderson, who could not physically attend the conference, delivered his presentation via video conferencing. It was the last minute arrangement and the preparation committee was very anxious about the technical glitches in connecting live for a big screen, but the connection went very smoothly and we even had a lively question and answer session remotely after his presentation. His talk was about disruptive technologies in distance education; namely, OERs, connectivism as a new pedagogy, disaggregated research, and credentialing such as a Prior Learning and Recognition (PLAR) system. Ms. Bando delivered her presentation from a policy maker’s point of view, discussing the issues Japan is currently facing and introducing the university reform policy. She stressed the expected role OUI should play in the near future in meeting the needs of diverse learners in Japan. Lastly, Dr. Belawati, the recipient of this year’s AAOU Meritorious Service Award, presented the challenges of quality assurance in a mega open university such as University Terbuka.

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Not only the above-mentioned academic sessions, the conference presented social events including Yosakoi, which started as a regional traditional dance but gained a nationwide popularity for street dance competitions, as well as Taiko drumming and funny mask dancing.

The 27th AAOU Annual Conference next year will be hosted by Allama Iqbal Open

University - the largest open university in the world. The theme of the conference is “Leveraging the Power of Open and Distance Education for Building a Divergent Asia: Today’s Solutions and Tomorrow’s Vision.” Their website is at <http://aaou2013.aiou.edu.pk>. We very much look forward to gathering again in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 1-3 October 2013.

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