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Editorial :

Supporting Open Learning and Distance Education in Asia

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In this first Editorial of this Journal, we should like to set out the reasons why we decided to start such a venture, the current Asian landscape as we see it, and the way forward we are planning.

In recent years, we have become increasingly aware that the Anglo-American perspective does not address the local concerns of distance education in Asia in sufficient detail. It is not so much that the perspectives published in the West are not relevant – indeed we recognize that they are, and such perspectives published serve to provide very valuable resources to us in Asia, especially to those of us who are in the more remote regions. The driving force is rather that studies of Asian local concerns which perhaps do not have global import remain unpublished and so we are all the poorer for the lack of an Asian forum.

Some research published in the West does involve cross-cultural issues and multi-culturalism. Those studies, we feel, are overly concerned with acculturation to the western standards, to embrace the minorities perhaps to enrich the majority, and this despite the massive numbers of open and distance education students in Asia. There is a difference in philosophy between ‘distance education’ which seeks to impose uniformity and conformity to an institutional standard and ‘open learning’ that seeks to value and foster the diversity of the students (Edwards, 1995). While global and western reports are attending to multi-culturalism, we are aiming to look at the mono-culturalism at the local level, not at the multi-lingualism of a global classroom, but the wide-ranging varieties of mono-lingualism and bi-lingualism in our local regions. While western reports of approaches to learning have identified for example an Asian approach, different from the established western institutionally-desired approach, now it has been found that Hong-Kong-Chinese learn differently from Malaysian-Chinese, and differently again from Singaporean-Chinese (Smith & Smith, 2000). In this way, we in Asia need to investigate our own students, to investigate our own teaching, and to publish and share our findings. Certainly, our new reports from Asia will serve all those throughout the world who are interested in the different ways of Asians.

General concepts are borrowed massively from the West. They need to be tried, adapted, tested-out, and published. Local concepts also need to be shared. Hopefully findings from one region here in Asia will find interest and effectiveness in local neighbouring regions. In other aspects too – such as local information on events and reports of conferences – we hope to

serve those in Asia. Travelling to the United States is two-fold distant : it is far away in money and kilometres, and also far away sometimes in relevance. Hence we have set out in this our venture to provide such a service to Asia in the form of the Asian Journal of Distance Education.

We should like to limit relevance to within the educational region of Asia, while recognizing that studies outside may also be of Journal interest. If potential author(s) are in doubt as to whether their study is sufficiently relevant or not, they may seek further advice from the Editor(s).

We understand that most of our intended authors are writing in English as a Second Language. We urge them to have their English proof-read by a native-speaker to speed up the editorial process. We provide Author Guidelines at the end of each Issue. If any author(s) should like assistance or further advice, they are invited to email to the Editors, who will try to serve and help them as best we can.

With respect to this first Issue, the content deals with support both to faculty and to students. In the first Article, Fred Lockwood presents a 'Ladder' to guide faculty in getting published. Researchers in Asia understand how difficult it is for us to get our work published in western journals and books. Indeed, to help in this respect is one of the main aims of this Journal. Fred's advice is therefore timely and highly suited to this first Issue.

The following Article is by Wei-yuan Zhang and his colleagues in Hong Kong who present research findings about tutorial support to students. Their findings that students want more face-to-face tutorials are likely to attract some Comments in this Journal's next Issue. It will be interesting to find out whether increased participation in face-to-face tutorial can show some statistical correlation with improved learning and grades. In such case, institutions will need to consider carefully when considering cost efficiencies. Wei-yuan and his colleagues concluded that online tutorial support may be the best way forward.

Next Tony Bates discusses online support to students covering a wide range of issues – from the cognitive theory of learning and collaborative learning in a group, to choosing the technology and designing the course. Tony's Article is drawn from the new book 'Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education' co-authored with Gary Poole, and which is reviewed later in this Issue. (It is interesting to note they state their focus on higher education, and so avoid the confusion between effective uses of technologies in primary and secondary education in contrast to uses in higher education. A review by SK Pulist is included in this Issue of the effective use of technologies in primary and secondary schools.) This particular Article will inspire faculty to be critical thinkers and this in turn may help promote more pragmatic research in Asia.

Usha Reddi in the next Article gives her reflections on the current State of the Art of research in Asia. She classifies research as either pure or applied, and feels there is a great need in Asia for more pragmatic and useful research – research that is rooted in theory yet nevertheless has practical value and concludes we need to undertake more pragmatic research for example into learner support systems for Asian students in Asia.

Next Paul Kawachi reviews how technologies have been used in Asia, and finds that most institutions use technologies for delivering and sharing content, and not for collaborative co-construction of new knowledge. Paul suggests that a scaffold may be helpful to inform and guide learning critical thinking in higher education in Asia, and points out that the core of such a scaffold is collaborative interaction. Since many regions in Asia are busy developing, there is demand for courses to be more practical and relevant to developmental needs now, with less theoretical discussion. In the long-term however, Asia will need to have its own critical thinkers, and so the central core of collaborative learning skills should not be passed over.

One way in which collaborative learning in a group can be facilitated is through mobile technologies. These are presented in the next Article by Kinshuk and his colleagues. Mobile technologies can now link together what before were independent learners into a community of learners. These authors indicate that the clear advantage of mobile technologies is that the student can be learning in context, in other words mobility brings the technology nearer to the actual learning situation. Such support can be of great effectiveness to Asians by removing travelling time and distance. Moreover, Tony Bates in a chapter a couple of years ago (2001) suggested that some institutions may be considering moving into e-learning with falling costs, but were waiting for these wireless technologies so as to leapfrog over the costs of hardwiring their buildings. This Article by Kinshuk and colleagues is of interest therefore in this respect, though as they discuss, there are many functional aspects to be resolved. Advances in this area of mobile technologies will be welcomed support for all students in Asia.

The concluding Article concerns student satisfaction by Helen Khoo and Rozhan Idrus. They surveyed their students in Malaysia to discover to what extent their students' expectations of various support provisions were exceeded by the institution. They found that sufficient support was provided in areas of print media, while teletutorial support should be developed and more used by the institution. This ties in nicely with the earlier Article from Hong Kong on the need for developing online tutorial support.

In this Issue we have two Focus Reports. Both are from the edges of Asia, and both should be of interest to open and distance learning in Asia. The first concerns Papua New Guinea, and lies just outside of Asia, yet it shares many common aspects. Andrew Nyondo describes succinctly the state of distance education in Papua New Guinea. In particular, he notes that with very high unemployment, spending money on their children's education is not high on the personal agenda of families. Despite the difficulties they face in Papua New Guinea, Andrew conveys a new sense of optimism which will inspire everyone. The second Focus Report is by Salih Usun on the status of distance education in Turkey – which is on the opposite side of Asia and which at the same time is politically and geographically in Europe, though developmentally it may share more in common with other Asian countries than with western countries. Salih describes in some detail the difficulties and the successes in Turkey. Both these Focus Reports may bring Comments in the next issue – concerning Papua New Guinea, it would be interesting to learn how the people are changing their opinion towards supporting distance education for development ; and concerning Turkey, it would be interesting to know more about their coping strategies for such large numbers – with Anadolu one of the largest mega-universities in the world, at 760,000 students and increasing every year. It may also be interesting to learn why the total numbers fell slightly in the mid-nineties, and how the open university system responded to that fall in numbers.

Following these two Focus Reports, there are two papers presented as Work-in-Progress – both concerning support to the students and both presenting an unresolved question. In the first, Frank Carbullido brings up the same issue mentioned by Tony in his Article of how to motivate students to participate in online discussions. Frank describes a not-uncommon scenario. With hindsight, each of us may have designed our courses differently from the outset, yet given where he is now, he faces the question of what to do next. After gradually moving his students over into e-learning, student autonomy has increased but at the cost of losing the didactic conversation with the tutor as guide. In the Article from Malaysia, Khoo and Idrus proposed the way forward is to treating the student as a customer, where generally the customer is always right and gets what he or she wants and has paid for. It is easy to see how problems may occur later on down this road, when the tutor has to fail a student for not participating in the online discussions. The question is how far can we allow students to exercise autonomy while still retaining rights to assessment and accreditation. Some structure must be retained by the institution.

In the second report of Work-in-Progress, Therese Lask shows how email can be utilized for cost-effective student support. Receiving a regular news-bulletin each week can provide often needed psychological support. Especially in the first year of higher education, when

high drop-out rates might occur sometimes attributed to loneliness and lack of institutional presence, then email may be worthwhile exploring as a velvet addition to our strategic arsenal. Tailoring the email content to each student or small group of students may be too time-consuming, but a unified bulletin with hypertext links should be practical. It will be interesting to see how the drop-out rate responds to this intervention.

In this first Issue, there are no Comments received. Comments are invited from readers on any Article, Focus Report or Work-in-Progress for inclusion here in the January Issue (vol 2 no 1).

Four Book Reviews are next, and these books are each very relevant to Asia. The first book is authored by Professor Ramanujam who writes from much experience on how ODL in Asia should proceed. The second is more general with chapters from different regions around the world. The third book is by Tony Bates and Gary Poole, and an abstract from this book has been re-modelled in the Article by Tony in this Issue. Readers are encouraged to visit the dedicated website for this book at <http://www.batesandpoole.ubc.ca> where they will find an interactive learning environment for readers to share their opinions and discuss the book. The fourth review is on open primary and secondary education, with chapters from around the world.

In this first Issue we conclude by giving Author Guidelines, and details for how to subscribe. At this early stage, subscriptions are limited to institutions. Individuals can make use of the website of the Journal for accessing Abstracts, freely, together with other web-based resources such as useful links, and an archive of Abstracts from multifarious quarters all with a relevance to open learning and distance education in Asia. All students and researchers with an interest in Asia should find this an ideal portal for their studies.

We should like to thank all those who have supported us this far and we shall work in order that we feel worthy of their continued support. Especially in this regard, we thank all the distinguished members of the Editorial Advisory Board for their continued kind support. We are looking forward to a busy future.

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