



The Need for an Asian Open Learning Network to strengthen Open and Distance Education in Asia

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ABSTRACT :

Distance learning is a necessary programme for any thriving and expanding university the world over. Aside from being a vital gateway to higher education for students whose locations are far from the intended university, it is also a business industry for the university concerned which markets its programmes via distance learning to the clients i.e. students. Therefore, it is imperative that the clients of such programmes, be they full-time or part-time students, receive the utmost value for their investment. This investment could be in terms of finance, time, and personal sacrifices. This paper hypothesised that there exist several linguistic and cultural constraints affecting ESL learning of adult non-native learners in a Universiti Malaysia Sabah distance learning programme. The sample for this preliminary study is 35 adult students in their third year who had already taken all the four semesters of ESL classes during their first and second year. This is a significant sample because the students are the pioneers of the university's distance learning programme. Due to this pioneer status, it is felt that the students' response to what linguistic and cultural constraints affected their learning of the English language is most important to be analysed and documented. This study found that among the linguistic constraints were the length of exposure as well as familiarity to the English language prior to entering the programme, first language interference, and language of instruction in the ESL classroom. Meanwhile, amongst the cultural constraints found were students' difficulties to differentiate between studies and other family commitment (classes were held on weekends as the students are full time teachers), students' low level of confidence in their own ability with regard to the English language, and the level of relationship between students and lecturers when the latter are often much younger in age and teaching experience than the former. This paper aims to highlight these constraints so as to 1) better improve the current ESL classes within the distance learning programme for the benefit of present and future students of the programme, and 2) to minimise any existing gaps in ESL learning in an on-campus or a distance learning programme of a university.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Asia is the largest continent in the world and it accommodates more than three billion people. In Asia, like in other regions of the world, the countries are as diverse in many respects just as they are similar in others. Some of the common features include huge and rapidly expanding populations which are still mainly rural and

exceptionally large demand for education which has not been met, the lack of adequate capacity of conventional educational systems to provide access for all, and the inequitable representation of those who have been marginalized through resources, location, economic and other reasons. History of open and distance learning is can be traced back to 1950s and 1960s. However, the 80s and 90s of the last

century witnessed phenomenal growth of open and distance learning institutions in Asia. More than 40 open universities try their level best to provide educational opportunities to millions of learners.

In this write up, there are suggestions to improve the Distance Education scenario in this continent. We have argued that there is a necessity of establishing an Open University Network in Asia to provide better services to distance learners. we have also proved that such a network can play a crucial role in systematizing and co-coordinating open and distance education in Asia. we have also proved that such a network can play a crucial role in systematizing and coordinating open and Distance education institutions in Asia.

2. SOCIO-ACADEMIC BACKGROUND :

The continent of Asia 'Stretches from Korean Peninsula in the East to the Afghanistan in the West, from the Sino-Russian borders in the North-East to the atolls of the Maldives in the South-West. ... Civilisations of these countries are ancient and so too are their storehouse of knowledge' (Tam, 1998). Despite the wealth of resources, culture, knowledge and traditions of learning, this is a continent that faces tremendous challenges and has a direct impact on us providers of educational services (Dhanarajan, 1996). This continent is characterized by the multiplicity of religions ethnic groups and languages. 'By Asia, we mean the thirty-three nations that comprise the sub-regions of East Asia, South-East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, West-South West Asia' (Livmson & Christensen, 2002).

'Culturally and linguistically the region is again the most complex in the world...there are thousands of languages spoken across Asia and within several nations (for example, India China, Indonesia) people speak many difference languages. Asia is also home to atleast a thousand different cultural groups. Some of who have never been studies closely' (Livmson & Christensen, 2002).

The main problem of Asian countries is

the ever-increasing population. Some of the statistics are really astonishing;

- 'Two-thirds of the world populations are in Asia (about 3 billion).
- By the year 2000, 800 million more bodies will be added to the already population.
- There are 1 billion childrens under the age of 15 years and up to 400 million fewer than 24 years are out of formal education.
- 500 million adults, over 24 years need education in one form or another in a region characterised by heavy population, incredible migration and rapid mobility.' (Tam, 1998).

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ASIA :

We can see that several countries have realized the distance education is the only solution for several Socio-academic problems that prevail in for long time. The main factors that were prompted and persuaded administrators and policy makers in these countries to support for the establishment of distance education system are given below.

- Cost effectiveness.
- Scope for updating the know how of workmen.
- Possibility of catering to the educational needs of more numbers of students.
- Flexibility in learning.
- Possibility of reaching out more students with the help of new information and communication technologies.

As we mentioned earlier, several Asian countries found that distance education can solve several Socio-academic problems and it resulted in the phenomenal development of distance education in Asia. 'Most of the countries in this region have adopted the latest innovations of distance education and established open Universities. The upsurge in enrolment rates in these institutions points to the ever-increasing demand for education at various levels. Further, it shows that distance education has been recognised as a viable and effective complementary or alternative system to the traditional one' (IGNOU, 1998). There are several open universities

in this continent, and let us have glance to the prevailing scenario.

Most of the Asian open universities are modeled on the Open University of UK. Prof. Ramanujan says, 'the success of the British Open University in the seventies obviously acted as as the inspiration for policy makers in many developing countries to establish their own open universities or distance teaching unit' (Ramanujam, 2002).

Bangladesh :

This country has established Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education to offer academic programmes through distance mode and was merged with the Bangladesh Open University in 1996 (IGNOU, 1998). This university provides higher education to large member of students and offers non-formal education programs through short courses and programmes of general value in areas such as environmental protection, health, hygiene, sanitation etc.

China :

In China we can see that distance education has got wide recognition. Correspondence education was given much importance during the time of cultural evolution and in the post-Maovian period, demand for education in creased. In 1978 central radio and television university was established in 1978 and it is the largest distance education institution in the developing countries and more than 20 lakhs students are there on its rolls. There are 43 provincial radio and television universities. Television universities are established in places like Shanghai, The National Open University was established in 1986, which accelerated the growth of distance education in People's Republic of China (IGNOU, 1998).

India :

In India there are 11 open universities and more than 60 distance education institutes that offer educational opportunities to masses through distance mode. The establishment of IGNOU has catalyzed the growth of distance education in India. More than 15 percent of students now learn in India through distance mode.

South and South-East Asia :

In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia also distance education has been given

much importance. This is the case of Philippines, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Thailand, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong employed developments in information and communication technology for reaching out to a maximum number of students.

Japan :

In Japan, university level correspondence courses are usually the regular courses within the framework of conventional universities. Television and radio broadcasts are used as core-media supplemented by face-to-face sessions (UAJ, 2002). This university was established primarily in response to the general needs for life-long education for both radio and TV. This university has more than 700,000 students in its rolls. An important feature of this university is that there is a provision for classroom teaching and a regular graduate student must earn at least 20 credits through classroom teaching.

South Korea :

South Korea has a long history of correspondence education. The leading force of distance education in this Internet friendly country is the Korean National Open University. KNOU has been equipped to cope with changes in the digital era as it started to become a digital university. There are provisions for digital educational media, two-way videoconference, and electronic textbooks and Internet courseware. It has taken a leading role in establish consortia of cyber universities in Korea (KNOU, 2002). The notable trend in South Korea is the emergence of 'cyber' universities. There are more than 15 such cyber universities in South Korea, and they use digital technologies for the teaching learning transaction.

Middle-East Countries :

Countries like Iran, Israel, and Palestine have also established National level open universities .The recently established Arab Open University was established under the AGFUND (Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development organizations), which is presided over by HRH Prince Talal Bin Abdul. Azeez. It has launched operation in six country branches. These countries are Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Soudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt. Its headquarters is in

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Kuwait. It started academic programmes in 2002 (<http://www.arabou.org>).

The open universities in Asia include -

1. Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan
2. Al-Quids Open University, Palestine
3. Central Radio and Television University, Beijing, China.
4. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, , India
5. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Gujarat, India
6. Hanoi Open University, Viet Nam
7. Henan Radio and Television University, China
8. Indira Gandhi Open University, New Delhi, India
9. Jiangsu Radio and Television University, China
10. Jiangxi Radio and Television University, China
11. Korea National Open University, Korea
12. Kotta Open University, Rajasthan, India
13. Karnataka State Open University, India
14. M. P. Bhoj Open University, Madhya Pradesh, India
15. Nalanda Open University, Bihar, India
16. National Open University, Taiwan
17. Netaji State Open University, Calcutta, India
18. Open University of Sri Lanka
19. Open University of Hong Kong, China
20. Payame Noor University, Iran
21. Ramkhanhang University, Thailand
22. Shanghai Television University, China
23. Shanghai Television University, China
24. Shaanxi Radio and Television University, China
25. Si Chual Radio and Television University, China
26. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand
27. The National Open University, People's Republic of China (PRC)
28. The Open University, Israel
29. The University of Philippines Open University, Philippines
30. Tiansin Radio and Television University, China
31. Universiti Terbuka, Indonesia
32. University of the Air, Japan
33. University of Sain's Malaysia, Malaysia
34. University Tum Abdul Razak, Malaysia

35. Yashwant Rao Chavan Maharashtra Open University Nasik ,India

36. Yunnan Radio and Television Open University, China

From the above we can realize that distance education has been accepted as a supplementary and to certain extent, as a viable alternative to the conventional education and it is hoped that this mode of education can do a better service to the learners with the help of digital technologies. However, there are some lacunae in the functioning of these open universities. Most of these open universities were modelled on the Open University, UK and blind copying of western model resulted in unimaginable damages. Distance education in developing countries has to be based on the ground realities. Several studies were conducted to survey the distance education scenario in developing countries. These studies suggested that there are a number of lacunae in the functioning of open and distance education institutions in developing countries. According to Manjulika & Reddy (1999), these are;

- Inadequate finances
- Poor communication and infrastructural facilities
- Limited use of audio-visual medias.
- Shortage of experts to develop multimedia courses
- Lack of financial and academic autonomy for distance teaching institutions
- Low social and academic status of distance education because of quality issues.

In order to overcome these limitations and to improve the scenario, it may be suggested that there be a network of open universities and open teaching institutions.

4. AN 'ASIAN OPEN LEARNING NETWORK' - A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

As we have suggested earlier, there could be a network of open universities in the Asian continent, and it can improve the open learning scenario in this continent. The network will facilitate interaction among member countries. These interactions can be in the following forms.

- Academic exchange
- Resource sharing
- Credit Transfer
- Joint conducting of examinations
- Synchronization and systematization of academic activities
- Co-ordination in student support services

Each member open university may be given charge of preparing high quality course materials for a particular academic programme and which can be used through out the network. There can be an internet courseware too which can be hosted on internet so that e-learners under this network can download it for their use in case of the non-receipt of course materials sent by concerned open university. If this method is followed, there can be a large number of course materials, which can be a common property of the e-learning network.

There can be provision for academic exchange within the consortia so that faculty members of an open university can be transferred to another university so that there can be a maximum use of academic expertise of faculty available within the network. This type of cooperation among member universities would consolidate mutual respect and academic fraternity.

Resource sharing is the major advantage of networking and when we have a networked environment, we can have resource sharing in real sense. If we digitize the library collections of different open universities and if we keep these data on a server computer, these data can be shared and used by distance learners from different locations. This facility of technology will be a boost for reducing expenditure. For example, if we purchase one database or e-journal, and if we keep it on our main server, different open universities can have a copy of it and they need not to purchase same journal again. This is the case of other library collections like books and non-book materials like CDs, VCDs and DVDs.

There should be provision for credit transfer from one university to another under this consortium. If a student wanted to continue his/her studies in another university after a period of study in one university, the credits accumulated from the

university should be carried on to the new open university.

There should be synchronization in the conducting of admission and examination so that we can use common question papers for all students with vernacular versions. If needed, we should identify English as the medium for such a pan-Asian or international academic programme. It also necessitates a common fee structure for a particular academic program. The executive MBA program jointly offered by the Commonwealth of Learning, IGNOU, AIOU and BDOU is a glaring example for such academic co-operation. There can be a well-planned student support system for making maximum benefit from such network. For this we should use digital technologies like Internet, virtual classroom and digital libraries etc. These aspects of multi-dimensional use of digital technologies have been incorporated in several distance learning software packages like Edutrack ©, Caroline ©, and Blackboard © etc. These packages are really comprehensive learning management systems and can be used for this type of high-tech e-learning.

The majority of the open universities in developing countries follow traditional distance teaching methods and once they adopt modern technologies, there can be a sea change in the academic scenario of these countries. But the main hurdle and hindrance of adopting technologies is the poor infrastructure of the developing world.

There exist a digital divide between the developed and developing countries all over world and Asia is not an exception. Thousands of learners in Asia do not even have a telephone connection. So how can these advancements in technologies be capitalized upon and exploited? We have some pragmatic views on these issues. We should convert the existing study centers of open universities into multi-media telelearning centres equipped with the latest technologies. Distance learners should be able to use these hi-tech centers so that the absence of technological infrastructure can be overcome. We will discuss these multi media tele-learning centres in detail later. This new open learning network should

have networks of such multi-media telelearning centres, and this will ensure that the digital divide prevailing in the Asian continent will not be a hindrance for learners to learn in the digital environment.

Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, can be the headquarters of this consortium. This is because of the fact that this city acts as the corridor between South Asia and South-East Asia. It can be easily reached from different cities in Asia. There can be a large number of regional centres for this consortium to look after and co-ordinated regional activities. One regional centre may be for one or more countries. An organizational chart for this proposed AOLN involves Regional Centres at Bangkok, Beijing, Islamabad, Jerusalem, Kuwait City, New Delhi, Penang, Seoul, Tehran, and Tokyo. Each Regional Centre will have a network of study centres. These study centres have to be equipped with modern information and communication technologies to send and retrieve information to and from the headquarters and regional centres. These technologically advanced study centres can be termed Multimedia Telelearning Centres (MTLC). These MTLCs will be the focal point where student can interact with the open learning network, the regional centre to which he is attached to and to interact with his peers. Scholars have underlined the importance of such multi media telelearning centres and the following discussion on MTLCs is based on a paper presented in the XVI AAOU Conference proceedings (AAOU, 2002). These MTLCs should have the following infrastructure;

- Minimum 100 PCs with Internet connectivity.
- Minimum 5 laser printers.
- Television with VCD and DVD players.
- Facility for Internet relay chatting.
- Digital audio and video receiving facility.

Facilities for video streaming which will help learner to view live shows/live lectures on net using Real Time Transfer Protocol. There should also be facilities for email and fax. These Regional Centers should take into account the prevailing digital divide in developing countries where the benefits of

distance education have been enjoyed mainly by urbanites. By establishing such collaborative networks, we can provide maximum assistance to distance learners in remote area for whom education is still an unfulfilled promise. The services of these MTLCs may be provided on a minimum payment. For example, students may be charged US\$100 for the services provided for a period of one year.

These centers should be managed by computers with access to individual information on each student, and the centres should be able to help distance learners in using the facilities of the centres. There can be short training programmes for students in remote areas who have no computer background. These centres should be interconnected by optical fibre which should facilitate high-speed data transfer and downloading and uploading facilities.

4. THE 'ASIAN OPEN LEARNING NETWORK' – RELEVANCE :

This open learning network may function as the umbrella body for open universities in Asia. We can also include distance education directorates, conventional universities that provide distance education programmes. Thus it will be a big network that might be bigger than EDEN (European Distance and E-Learning Network) or other such networks. Asian nations, which participate in this network, have to pay a minimum amount for the functioning of this network. Development agencies like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank etc can assist this open learning network in a big way. The Commonwealth of Learning can also have an important role in the functioning of this network. The most important aspect of this network is that it would cement the solidarity among Asian countries and this co-operation may later on lead to have a type of Asian Union in the pattern of European Union. This will be a great leap in the international relations within the Asian continent.

The necessity of establishing a collaborative networking was underlined by

Prof.SW.Tam way back in 1998. He said, 'In view of the difficulties in keeping pace with development in knowledge explosion, tele communications, distance and open learning, developing countries would benefit immensely by taking advantage of developments in technology to interact through a collaborative network.' He put forward the following reasons for instituting such a collaborative network (Tam, 1998);

- Common purpose
- United front
- Globalization and strategic bonding
- Complementing similar networks

The collaborative network will provide the open and distance learning in the Asia region to do a lot of things which distance or lack of face-to-face meeting; for example, collaborative network¹⁶ could be used to promote (i) intra and institutional cooperation, (ii) rapid sharing of information on changes in educational paradigm, (iii) management of distance learning innovation in pedagogy and technology as and when available or needed, (iv) maximization of the use of resources by sharing across geographical and other borders to develop a collegiate environment towards common professional and educational matters within the region and (v) effectively manage learning in an environment which indicates that the border between traditional and open universities might soon become blurred with emerging developments in technology and education.

5. CONCLUSION :

Distance education has been accepted as the supplementary and to certain extent, complementary to the formal education. This mode of education is an historical necessity for developing countries to provide education to all people. Distance education has been rightly described as the social catalyst (Madhavan & Roy, 2000) to bring forth desirable socio-academic changes in developing countries.

We can see that more importance is to be given to distance education in Asian countries as it can provide educational opportunities the widespread number of

people. This continent accommodates more than three billion people and there should be a re-thinking and re-engineering in the educational scenario of this continent. We have discussed the present status of distance education in Asian countries and have suggested that there be more concerted effort to improve the distance-learning scenario in this continent. We have also provided the blueprint and organizational chart for a new comprehensive Asian Open Learning Network. This type of academic networking would in the long term help to save much money through providing effective learning facilities to the masses throughout Asia.

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