



Editorial

The Asian Age Variable in Open and Distance Education

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Naturally it is difficult to achieve a theme for an issue common to each of the Papers. Some journals produce occasional issues on a pre-set theme with and by a guest editor. How difficult the task must be for the guest editor(s) when their first efforts and aims need revising. This present issue began the year with a variety of papers continuing the theme of listening to students, and many of those papers submitted are included here. However, as this year progressed a more specific aspect began to emerge. This concerned the age of the students engaging open and distance education in Asia.

Doubtless we have all studied Western findings of the differences in students according to age. However in the West, these differences have focused on a single cohort with findings usually presenting changes in motivation with age as the reason for their taking up open and distance education. Adults generally are likely to have current commitments different from those of young teenage university students, and their motivations are usually different as a consequence. Several years of relevant work experience are also recommended – if not required – for those intending to study at the postgraduate level. Certainly this is the case for a master's degree in vocations such as nursing and teaching. The cost is also a factor for students taking open and distance education courses – and students may work for several years before starting these courses.

Age is moreover important as we develop to living within an age when an individual needs to continually re-train and re-educate him- or her-self to change tracks in mid-career and to adapt to the new world order : where this involves lifelong learning, e-learning, and the electronic age. So age is understandably a factor to be considered as a variable influencing the choice and qualification for open and distance education.

However, enrolment demographics are also changing. We are seeing an increasing number and proportion of ODE students who are young (see for instance data on open education in Japan in Kawachi, 2005), as well as the increasing number and proportion of those who are old. As a result, there may be no longer a statistical normal distribution by age. Instead we now see at several open universities about fairly equal numbers (about 25%) in each of the age brackets <25, 26-35, 36-45, and >46 years-old (see for example Kawachi, 2004 ; and Zhang et al., 2000). We must therefore be careful when we talk of the average student and the 'statistical mean' age. And more than this, we are seeing a distribution sometimes with two peaks – one among the young students and another among the old. An example is one survey in China that found younger students wanted more face-to-face tutoring than middle-aged students – though the reasons were not clear, this finding likely reflected the wants of those

younger students to get what they perceived to be as much as possible for their money, to get what they think they have paid for and are entitled to, and / or in other terms perceived better-value-for-money. A similar finding also in China was reported among older adults with the oldest students wanting more face-to-face interactivity. This was due to the motivational difference : the oldest adult students took up ODE for socialization reasons, not for vocational motivation (which was the most common motivation reported a mere ten years ago for adults taking up ODE, by Duke, 1996, p. 628). Needs have changed. An earlier draft of this Editorial was entitled 'Still Listening to the Students' concerning their needs, but a more salient aspect has become apparent and this concerns the ages of the students. The present issue has a selection of papers on e-learning in Asia where age has been studied as a factor.

The first is by Chui & Sandhu who examined the efficacy of in-service training by e-learning. Learning while still working will become more and more important in the coming years. They found that the number of years in the company was not a factor (with their satisfaction only to ease of navigation showing a very weak correlation with number of years ; at $p=0.065$, at the 10% level).

The second is by Riana, Zuhairi & Maria who identified the student motivation to study at a distance was different according to age – with the younger students being goal-oriented aiming for career enhancement or in their term 'status enhancement'. Over all ages, however, the leading motivation was experiential, and the convenience aspect was important.

In terms of the pre-internet seminal work by Gibbs, Morgan & Taylor 1984 who studied on-campus students, Riana et al. find that intrinsic vocational motivation is more relevant to the younger students while over all ages the intrinsic personal motivation is the leading cause underlying the decision to take up distance e-learning. This has important consequences – as they note – for marketing distance e-learning courses. With falling numbers of teenagers in Japan, and in Korea, even conventional

universities should be taking note that students may choose their university based mainly on the job prospects they will gain, rather than on academic interest or personal self-development. Also putting a high value on gainful employment, young students in Britain are increasingly enrolling in the Open University there rather than conventional universities, in order to be able to work in the daytime and study conveniently in the evenings. That conventional universities will need to become more flexible and adopt more technology such as e-learning was proposed by Jarvis (2000). His paper is cited by Riana et al., and his paper is also relevant to the paper here by Wong that finds that e-learning is rated as important by conventional fulltime students.

Wong reports that fulltime students on campus express the same benefits about e-learning as do working adults studying at a distance by e-learning. Though, he notes that working adults experienced more difficulties. Perhaps study skills courses would help older adults to navigate e-learning courseware, and reduce some of the perceived limitations.

The paper here by Mital & Luthra also finds an age correlation among working adults to the perceived benefits and limitations in e-learning – adding more depth to the findings of the earlier papers in this issue. The paper by Mital & Luthra suggests that customization of in-house e-learning courseware will improve satisfaction rates, and moreover that the various workers themselves should be able to give design input to such customization.

Chui & Sandhu also found that the company officeworkers were generally satisfied with in-house customized courses, so buying in ready-made courses may be avoided. Continually adapting in-house e-learning courseware may therefore be a reasonable policy for companies to follow, and technical departments should take on this task, perhaps leading to the company saving money in the long-term by not having to buy expensive updated versions from outside sources.

Also in this issue, we have an important paper by Mukerji & Tripathi who compiled

comprehensive nationwide data in India and present these data state-by-state. These data can help in marketing by directly identifying the geographical areas in need of e-learning development. Assuming the states have similar age distributions, then e-learning can be targeted to younger students for improving job prospects, and to working adults for personal development or for work-related development with worker input in the design. Indeed, having input into the design from the users themselves is also the main finding in the paper in this issue by Salim & Raja Zainal Abidin, who report that student input will lead to greater satisfaction with e-learning web-based courses in Malaysia.

The other paper in this issue is by Wang and looks at the online teaching styles in China. While the online tutors still hold onto their traditional approaches to teaching, they are gradually adopting other new Western-style approaches. That teachers prefer to adopt new ways in safe small steps has been found in Japan (Kawachi, 2000), and this may be also the case in China. We should consider too the role of globalization, since teachers may be changing their ways when their students are being examined in Western-style tests (see Cheng, 1999, on the washback effect on teachers' ways of teaching in China).

This journal aims to keep a policy of about seven papers in each issue. Finding a common theme to all seven is always difficult. However in this issue focusing on students and their views has been achieved with fair success. It is clear the paper by Wang focuses on teachers, but we should bear in mind that teachers may change their teaching ways in time due to student needs.

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