Chapter 6
Open and Distance Learning in Asia: Status and Strengths

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Abstract This paper presents an overview of the current status of open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia—a continent regarded as a major region in which ODL flourishes. It profiles the member institutions of the Asian Association of Open Universities, covering diverse areas such as the countries/regions of the institutions, the years of establishment, the numbers of students and academic staff, the types of institutions and their levels of programmes. Against this background, the strengths of, and opportunities for, ODL in Asia are discussed from the perspectives of the potential number of students, growth in Internet users, expertise in distance education, government support and inter-institutional collaboration. Possible ways for further development are also suggested.

Keywords Open and distance learning (ODL) · Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) · Asia

Introduction

Asia has for long been a region where opportunities for education for its population have been badly needed. This is illustrated by its substantial and speedy population growth that will outpace the growth of educational provision which always require additional resources, organisational planning and approval procedures. Thus, the world literacy reports always point out that alongside the population growth, the illiterate population in Asia also continues to grow. It is projected that the population in this continent will not reach its peak until about the year 2050 (Gerland et al., 2014).

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The Asian countries also feature diversity in their educational contexts. For example, the literacy rates in some Asian countries remain low,[1] while some others are at their most developed level. Also, while the Internet penetration rate in Asia—36.9% on average—is at a level similar to that in developing counties, certain Asian countries have the fastest Internet speed in the world (International Telecommunication Union, 2015).

The diverse educational contexts in Asia have shaped the ways in which open and distance learning (ODL is delivered. During the past decades, ODL) institutions have been established in various Asian regions but with different foci in terms of the levels of programme offered, class size and the reliance on private education. A profiling of such diversity is presented in this paper, against which the strengths of, and opportunities for, ODL in Asia are highlighted.

Methodology

This study covers a broad range of ODL institutions in Asia in order to present an overview of ODL development and analyse its potential. The data cover member institutions of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU)—a non-profit organisation of higher learning institutions providing open and distance education. Among the 59 member institutions in the AAOU, 54 were selected for this study. They cover various Asian regions, ranging from Central Asia to East Asia and South Asia to Southeast Asia. As they include developed and developing countries and regions, they can be regarded as representative of the present status of ODL in Asia.

Information about these institutions was collected from various media obtained through Internet search engines, such as the institutions' official websites, booklets, prospectuses, annual reports, newsletters and brochures on enrolment. The information was categorised into five areas: (1) country/region, (2) year of establishment, (3) number of students and academic staff, (4) the public-private distinction of the institution and (5) level of programmes.

Profile of Selected ODL Institutions

Country/Region of the Institutions

Table 6.1 shows the country/region of the selected ODL institutions in Asia. The 54 selected AAOU member institutions cover a total of 22 countries/regions, with 25 (46.3%) of them located in India, China and Malaysia, while some are in

[1] According to *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.), the literacy rates of more than 20% of the Asian countries are below the world average (86.3%).

Table 6.1 The country/region of the selected AAOU member institutions

Part of Asia	Country/region	Number of institutions
Eastern Asia	China	8
	Hong Kong	3
	Korea	2
	Taiwan	2
	Japan	1
	Mongolia	1
Southeast Asia	Malaysia	6
	Philippines	4
	Indonesia	2
	Vietnam	2
	Myanmar	1
	Singapore	1
	Thailand	1
Southern Asia	India	11
	Pakistan	2
	Bangladesh	1
	Iran	1
	Nepal	1
	Sri Lanka	1
Western Asia	Kuwait	1
	Palestine	1
	Turkey	1

developed countries, such as Japan, Korea and Singapore. Such geographical distribution shows that, despite the diversity of development status of the various localities, ODL has been practised throughout Asia.

Number of Institutions Established by Decade

Table 6.2 shows the numbers of selected ODL institutions established during the past decades. Among the institutions, the earliest ODL provider was established in the 1950s. Since then, there has been a clear upsurge of institutions providing ODL, and the number has kept increasing and peaked in the 1990s, during which 14 new institutions offering ODL being set up. The trend began to slow down since then, as only two institutions have been newly established and joined the AAOU in the 2010s. The figures also show different trends in ODL development in the regions. For example, the ODL institutions in China were established early from the 1950s to the 1970s; while, in India, the first institution began in the 1970s and others have been added in every decade since then.

Table 6.2 The numbers of selected AAOU member institutions established in various regions during the past decades

Period	Countries/regions (number of institutions established during the period)	Total
1950s	China (1), Hong Kong (1)	2
1960s	China (2), Malaysia (1), Philippines (1)	4
1970s	China (5), India (1), Korea (1), Pakistan (1), Thailand (1)	9
1980s	India (3), Hong Kong (2), Indonesia (1), Iran (1), Japan (1), Philippines (1), Sri Lanka (1), Taiwan, (1), Turkey (1)	12
1990s	India (3), Philippines (2), Vietnam (2), Bangladesh (1), Indonesia (1), Malaysia (1), Myanmar (1), Nepal (1), Palestine (1), Taiwan (1)	14
2000s	Malaysia (4), India (3), Korea (1), Kuwait (1), Pakistan (1), Singapore (1)	11
2010s	India (1), Mongolia (1)	2

Table 6.3 Numbers of students of the selected AAOU member institutions

Number of academic staff	Number of students					
	Below 10,000	10,001–100,000	100,001–1,000,000	Above 1,000,000	NA[a]	Total (%)
Below 100	2	7	1		2	12 (22.2%)
101–1000	5	8	4	1	1	19 (35.2%)
1001–2000		5	1			6 (11.1%)
2001–3000		2		2		4 (7.4%)
Above 3000		1	5	1		7 (13.0%)
NA[a]	1	3	1		1	6 (11.1%)
Total (%)	8 (14.8%)	26 (48.1%)	12 (22.2%)	4 (7.4%)	4 (7.4%)	54 (100%)

[a]Data are not available

Numbers of Students and Academic Staff

Table 6.3 illustrates the numbers of students and academic staff of the selected AAOU member institutions. Nearly half (48.1%) of them have 10,001–100,000 students; and 22.2% have 100,001–1,000,000 students. Also, 14.8% and 7.4% of the institutions are in the categories of below 10,000 and above 1,000,000 students, respectively. As regards the number of academic staff, a majority (57.4%) of the institutions have 1000 or below; 18.5% have 1000–3000; and 13% have more than 3000.

While there is a linear proportion between the numbers of student and academic staff overall, there are also institutions with relatively large or small ratios between students and staff. For example, the Open University of China has as many as 3.59 million registered students,[2] with 499 academic staff;[3] but in contrast the

[2]http://en.ouchn.edu.cn/index.php/about-v2/new-style-university

[3]http://www.ouchn.edu.cn/html/jzdh/x03.html (in Chinese)

Table 6.4 Public-private distinction among the selected AAOU member institutions

Type of institution	Number	Percentage
Public	40	74.1%
Private	14	25.9%
Total	54	100%

International Center for Academics in Nepal was a rather small setup, with just above 1200 students but 78 faculty members.[4] This shows the distinctive diversity of institutional provision of ODL across Asian countries and regions.

Public and Private Institutions

Table 6.4 shows the number of selected institutions which are publicly or privately established. As can be seen in the table, most of the institutions are established and owned by the government (74.1%). However, the public-private divide in ODL provision can be misleading, as, for example, the Open University of Hong Kong is a self-financed university established by the government and is accountable to public governance, but it relies mainly on its tuition fees as its funding source.[5]

Levels of Programmes

Table 6.5 presents the levels of programmes in the selected institutions in various countries/regions. The results show that the ODL institutions in some countries tend to provide programmes at a particular level. For example, those in Japan, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Turkey, Nepal and Thailand offer mainly (i.e. above 50%) postgraduate programmes. In contrast, the ODL institutions in Myanmar, Palestine, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, Korea and Iran provide a majority of undergraduate programmes. For diploma programmes, they are mainly provided by the ODL institutions in China, and in these institutions, diploma programmes constitute 71.4% of all programmes. The diverse profiles of levels of programmes reveal different market positions or goals of ODL delivered in these countries/regions.

[4] http://www.ica.edu.np/document/Brochure%20ICA.pdf

[5] http://www.ouhk.edu.hk/wcsprd/Satellite?pagename=OUHK/tcSubWeb&c=C_WCM2004&`cid=1385170191283&lang=eng&l=C_PAU&lid=1385172188417

Table 6.5 Levels of programmes of the selected AAOU member institutions in various countries/regions

Country/region	Levels of programmes[a]		
	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Diploma[b]
Japan	*92.3%*	7.7%	0.0%
India	*72.9%*	16.4%	10.7%
Pakistan	*72.3%*	20.8%	6.9%
Malaysia	*64.0%*	30.1%	5.9%
Mongolia	*61.3%*	38.7%	0.0%
Turkey	*58.8%*	41.2%	0.0%
Nepal	*57.9%*	26.3%	15.8%
Thailand	*55.2%*	34.3%	10.4%
Myanmar	0%	*100%*	0.0%
Palestine	0.0%	*95.7%*	4.3%
Singapore	13.6%	*86.4%*	0.0%
Vietnam	20.0%	*80.0%*	0.0%
Indonesia	13.5%	*78.4%*	8.1%
Taiwan	0.0%	*70.6%*	29.4%
Korea	35.1%	*64.9%*	0.0%
Iran	47.6%	*52.4%*	0.0%
China	0.0%	28.6%	*71.4%*
Kuwait	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Hong Kong	24.8%	35.9%	39.3%
Bangladesh	35.3%	41.2%	23.5%
Sri Lanka	47.7%	31.8%	20.5%
Philippines	44.2%	49.8%	6.0%

[a]Percentages above 50% are in italic type
[b]Short courses and certificate programmes with duration of less than a year are excluded

Strengths and Opportunities

Given the profiles of Asian ODL institutions presented above, this section discusses the strengths of and opportunities for ODL in Asia, focusing on five areas: (1) potential number of students, (2) growth in Internet users, (3) expertise in distance education, (4) government support and (5) inter-institutional collaboration.

Potential Number of Students

Table 6.6 shows the United Nations' projection (2015) on continental population, where the population of most continents will keep growing and Asia will continue to be the continent with the largest population in the coming decades. It is emphasised that providing these massive populations with educational opportunities is one of pivotal foci of the post-2015 agenda (United Nations, 2015).

Table 6.6 Projection of continental population (United Nations, 2015)

Continent	Population (millions)				
	2015	2030 (Change compared with 2015)		2050 (Change compared with 2015)	
Africa	1186	1679	(41.6%)	2478	(108.9%)
Asia	4393	4923	(12.1%)	5267	(19.9%)
Europe	738	734	(−0.5%)	707	(−4.2%)
Latin America and the Caribbean	634	721	(13.7%)	784	(23.7%)
Northern America	358	396	(10.6%)	433	(20.9%)
Oceania	39	47	(20.5%)	57	(46.2%)

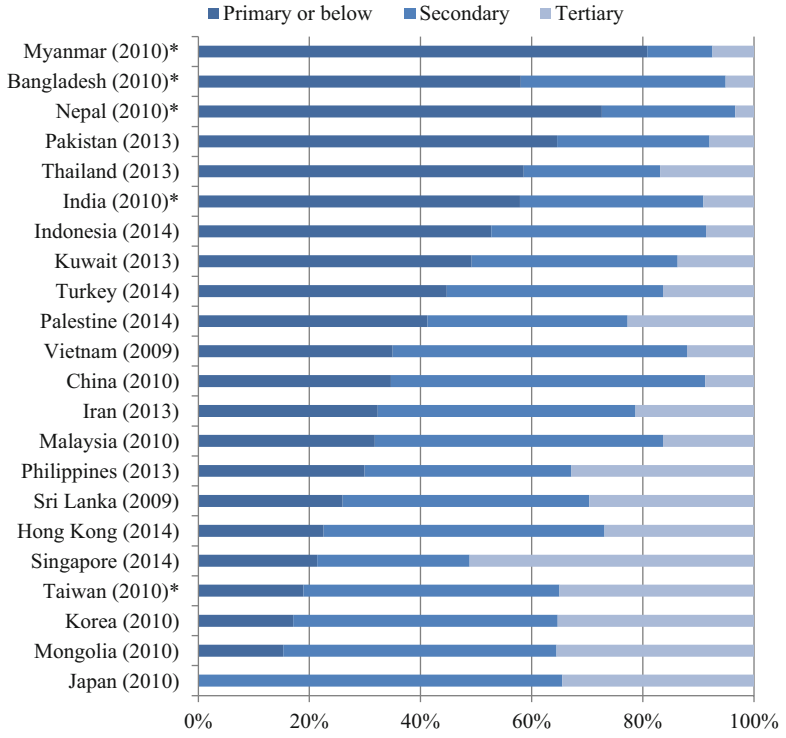

Fig. 6.1 Educational attainment for the countries/regions of the selected AAOU institutions (UNESCO Institute for Statistics; (http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/educational-attainment-data-release.aspx) *Barro-Lee Educational Attainment Dataset (http://www.barrolee.com/))

The potential numbers of ODL students are also revealed in the educational attainment of the countries/regions in question. Figure 6.1 presents the percentage of educational attainment for the population of 25 year olds and above in the countries/regions of the selected AAOU member institutions. For nearly 30% (7/22) of the countries/regions have less than 10% of their population attaining tertiary level of education. It is also notable that above 40% of the population in

Table 6.7 Internet penetration rate in the selected countries/regions (2005 and 2015)

Country/ region	Internet penetration rate (2005)	Internet penetration rate (2015)	Change in percentage
Myanmar	0.07	21.80	33416%
Bangladesh	0.24	14.40	5959%
Nepal	0.83	17.58	2127%
Sri Lanka	1.79	29.99	1673%
India	2.39	26.00	1089%
Philippines	5.40	40.70	754%
Indonesia	3.60	21.98	610%
China	8.52	50.30	590%
Iran	8.10	44.08	544%
Vietnam	12.74	52.72	414%
Palestine	16.01	57.42	359%
Turkey	15.46	53.74	348%
Mongolia	6.20	21.44	346%
Kuwait	25.93	82.08	317%
Pakistan	6.33	18.00	284%
Thailand	15.03	39.32	262%
Taiwan	58.01	87.98	152%
Hong Kong	56.90	84.95	149%
Malaysia	48.63	71.06	146%
Japan	66.92	93.33	139%
Singapore	61.00	82.10	135%
Korea	73.50	89.90	122%

http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/

nearly half (10/22) of the countries/regions has obtained only primary education or below (i.e. incomplete primary education or no schooling). As this group consists mainly of working adults, the conventional face-to-face learning mode may not suit their needs; thus flexible ODL may serve as a better alternative for the public to get access to education.

The Growth in Internet Users in Asia

As one of the major modes of ODL delivery, the Internet penetration rate of a country/region is highly related to the opportunities for ODL institutions to reach more students. The establishment of network infrastructure and the number of Internet users thus serve as the enablers or barriers for ODL to flourish in a country/region.

Table 6.7 shows the data from the International Telecommunication Union about the Internet penetration rate of the countries/regions of the selected AAOU member institutions in 2005 and 2015. All these countries/regions experienced an astonishing

growth in the number of Internet users in the past decade. Comparing to the global average—that is, 21.83 (2005) and 49.14 (2015) for an increase of 225%—it is noteworthy that a majority of the countries/regions (16/22) have a higher growth in the Internet penetration rate. Although the percentage of Internet users remains relatively low in some developing countries—below 40% in eight countries—a rapid growth can be expected for these countries in the foreseeable future. The availability of Internet coverage thus allows ODL institutions to provide learning opportunity to a broader range of learners.

Expertise in Distance Education

As noted earlier, the selected AAOU member institutions were established in Asia from the 1950s. With decades of experience in ODL provision, most of these institutions have developed extensive expertise in delivering distance education in terms of the scale of their operation and instructional methods.

The ODL institutions have developed ways to deliver education on a massive scale while catering for students' diverse needs. A number of the institutions have branches or study centres established throughout a country/region. For instance, Indira Gandhi National Open University[6] has a total of 67 regional centres and 2667 learner support centres in India to serve its more than three million students; and the Open University of Sri Lanka[7] has 8 regional centres, 18 study centres and 6 teaching centres. These support branches provide face-to-face consultation sessions and tutorials on the basis of learners' needs as a supplement to distance learning, which are significant for effective ODL implementation.

Apart from the scale of operation, many ODL institutions have developed online systems with comprehensive functions tailored for distance education. For instance, Asia eUniversity in Malaysia features technology-enabled education which '[enhances] interactivity in learner-academic relationship; allows personalised, flexible learning from anywhere; [and enables] access to high quality online resources on demand' (Asia eUniversity, 2016).

The expertise and experience of the ODL institutions allows them to maintain competitiveness on a sustainable basis in the market, while online learning has started to gain recognition by conventional face-to-face teaching universities. The conventional universities begin to offer more and more online programmes, including massive open online courses which have become increasingly popular. In other words, ODL institutions in Asia have notable contribution in introducing ODL and various kinds of online programmes in Asia. Not only are they taking a leading position in the development of ODL, but also the practice of online learning has been

[6] http://www.ignou.ac.in/ignou/aboutignou/profile/2

[7] http://www.ou.ac.lk/home/index.php/2013-12-19-09-04-42/introducing-ousl

increasingly adopted by conventional universities that conventionally mainly rely on face-to-face teaching.

Government Support

One characteristic of the selected Asian ODL institutions is that most of them (74%) are public institutions (see Table 6.4). This is in contrast to the overall situation in Asia where a majority of higher education institutions are private ones (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).[8] This indicates the critical role played by governments in ODL development through establishing ODL institutions and implementing relevant policies, as well as setting quality assurance standards (Darojat, Nilson, & Kaufman, 2015).

In the past, ODL institutions in Asia in general faced a problem of insufficient financial support from the government (Tsui, Zhang, Jegede, Ng, & Kwok, 1999; UNESCO, 2002). The situation has improved with various kinds of government support in place and the growing adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for ODL delivery. For example, for countries such as China and India, a high percentage of recurrent funding provided to ODL institutions has come from the governments for implementing government policy on improving literacy and numeracy rates, as well as the emerging technical and vocational skills in the process of rapid economic restructuring. Also, the government of Bangladesh supports ODL through tax exemptions for ICT equipment (APCICT, 2014).

Taking China as an example, the government made technology and education the two main directions for sustainable development of agriculture in rural areas. Owing to the limitations of rural areas, such as the shortage of teachers, ODL is a suitable way for learners there to receive education with flexibility in terms of time and space (Li, 2009). The Open University of China was appointed to develop retainable and potential talents for rural areas through promoting a wide range of designated diploma programmes (Wu, 2004). The government provided support through various incentives to boost enrolments in rural areas. As such, ODL serves as an effective means for the government to provide learning opportunities for those who can hardly be accessible using conventional face-to-face learning modes.

[8] According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2014), private institutions constitute on average 68% of higher education institutions among ten Asian countries, i.e. Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Korea, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Inter-institutional Collaboration

There has been a close connection among ODL institutions in Asia. The AAOU serves as a regional collaborative network with member institutions working together to 'widen the educational opportunities available to all people in Asia and to improve the quality of the institutions in terms of their educational management, teaching and research' (AAOU, n.d.). By holding annual conferences and publishing the *AAOU Journal*, members' institutions can exchange experiences in ODL and explore collaborative opportunities with other institutions. Other than AAOU, there are also ODL networks at the international level such as the International Council for Open and Distance Education[9] and subregional ones such as the OU5[10]—a collaboration among five ODL institutions in Southeast Asia with a master's programme jointly offered by ODL institutions in the ASEAN region.

Individual institutions also form connections to others through various kinds of collaboration. For example, the Open University of Japan has made collaborative agreements with 11 universities worldwide for collaborative course material development, joint research, dual degree and exchange programmes (The Open University of Japan, 2016). Inter-institutional collaboration is therefore one of the effective means to facilitate long-term development of ODL providers in Asia.

Conclusion

The profiling of ODL institutions shows how this education mode is being put into practice to cope with the specific context of each country/region in this continent. The unique features of ODL allow learners who can hardly be accessed using face-to-face learning modes to obtain opportunities for education. Despite the growing popularity of online courses being offered by conventional education institutions, ODL remains irreplaceable as shown in the massive number of students enrolled in the ODL institutions across Asia in this study.

It is envisaged that ODL can flourish further by capitalising on its strengths and opportunities. In particular, (1) there will be many more potential students available as the online population continues to grow, especially in developing countries; (2) advances in educational technologies will allow learning and teaching to be conducted in more effective ways; (3) more quality open educational resources are available from the OER (open educational resources) movement; (4) government support is expected from cooperating with governmental bodies to implement their policies in education; and (5) collaboration among ODL institutions could be promoted to facilitate learner mobility and strengthen transnational qualifications.

[9] http://www.icde.org/

[10] http://www.stou.ac.th/ou5/

Those are ways emphasised by the Commonwealth of Learning (2015) for ODL to support a sustainable future.

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