



## LET AGILITY TAKE ROOT

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## about *inspired*

*inspired* is a not-for-profit OUM e-magazine on the 3Ps - practice, policy and philosophy - of online, distance, and digital higher education. Published thrice-yearly, it engages a readership of OUM learners, staff, tutors and the interested public. *inspired* evolved out of *TCX (Tutor Connexions)*, a now-discontinued OUM e-newsletter which saw 45 issues published over almost a decade.

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## editor's note

Attentive readers would have noticed that, starting with Issue 18 which came out a year ago, *inspired* has pivoted to become more regional and global in its engagement with online, distance, and digital higher education (ODDHE). The editorial shift is indeed deliberate and was borne out of OUM's belief that a platform such as *inspired* has the potential to bring ODDHE stakeholders together to not only engage with contemporary ODDHE matters but also to engage them critically. As Emeritus Professor Junhong Xiao argues in this issue's guest feature, there is indeed an urgent need for ODDHE practitioners, particularly those in Asia, to resist wholesale adoption of ideas, tools, and practices generated elsewhere and to always take a context-sensitive – in short, critical – approach. Prof Xiao's advice is particularly relevant now, at a time when we are confronted with what OUM's Vice-Chancellor/President, Prof Ahmad Izanee Awang, invokes as VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Prof Izanee's address from the VC's office, which sets the tone for this issue, is a timely reminder that orthodoxy requires bracketing if we are to ride the VUCA wave instead of being swallowed by it. Riding the wave also requires us to know the micro- from the macro- and meso-issues of research and praxis, this being one of the key issues discussed in this issue's 'In Conversation' piece which features two leading scholars of our field, Prof Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Prof Insung Jung.

We hope you will find this issue as critically engaging as it has striven to be.

Best

Dr David Lim, Editor

# important dates

## New Learners

### E-TUTORIALS 1 & 2

15 - 28 Jan 2024



### E-TUTORIALS 3 & 4

29 Jan - 18 Feb 2024



### E-TUTORIALS 5 & 6

19 Feb - 3 Mar 2024



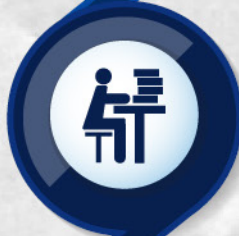
### E-TUTORIALS 7 & 8

4 - 17 Mar 2024



### E-TUTORIALS 9 & 10

18 - 31 Mar 2024  
(Postgraduates only)



### Final Exam

15 - 30 Apr 2024



## Senior Learners

### E-TUTORIALS 1 & 2

22 Jan - 4 Feb 2024

### E-TUTORIALS 3 & 4

5 - 25 Feb 2024

### E-TUTORIALS 5 & 6

26 Feb - 10 Mar 2024

### E-TUTORIALS 7 & 8

11 - 24 Mar 2024

### E-TUTORIALS 9 & 10

25 Mar - 7 Apr 2024  
(Postgraduates only)

### Final Exam

15 - 30 Apr 2024

## quick stats

# TOP 3 MOST POPULAR POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES (WITH HIGHEST NUMBER OF ACTIVE LEARNERS)

Postgraduate Diploma  
in Teaching (PGDT)



Master of Occupational  
Safety and Health Risk  
Management (MOSHRM)



Master of Islamic Studies  
(MIST)



## from the vc's office

## LET AGILITY TAKE ROOT

Already in the opening days of January 2024, the world bore witness to extreme weather events, geopolitical upheaval, plane collisions, and refugee crises. Such phenomena are more than just headlines. In fact, they typify an acronym that has been around since the late 1980s: VUCA.

VUCA – representing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – describes a world that is difficult to predict, interpret, respond to, or plan for. One such VUCA event is the Covid-19 outbreak. Another would be the emergence of next-generation artificial intelligence (AI), especially large language models like ChatGPT, and text-to-image engines like Stable Diffusion.

“ VUCA – representing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – describes a world that is difficult to predict, interpret, respond to, or plan for. ”

Such events can, and often do, blindside countries, industries, and organisations. That universities, including OUM, quickly began holding classes and exams online during the pandemic underscores just how important it is to be adaptable when the situation calls for it.

The reason I am emphasising VUCA in this issue of *inspired* is to highlight at the start of this new year how OUM will likely face many volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations over the next 12 months. These may include, for instance, ethical considerations surrounding AI and its repercussions on academic integrity. This,

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in particular, is a consequential matter that will require universities to carefully and holistically tackle any of its arising challenges.

As we face such possibilities (as well as others yet unimagined), OUM quite simply must know what to do if we want to continue providing excellent higher education. In other words, at the heart of VUCA is a mission we do not take lightly: whatever the situation, we must always do what is right for our learners and the OUM academic community.



Photo by Razif Masri

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## Looking back, looking ahead

The last two years of my appointment as OUM's fourth President/Vice-Chancellor have been challenging. Nevertheless, during this time the University achieved many things that I am very proud of.



at the heart of VUCA is a mission we do not take lightly: whatever the situation, we must always do what is right for our learners and the OUM academic community.



Learners and their needs have remained our priority. Nine programmes are now open for application under APEL.Q, an assessment approach that maximises the recognition of prior experiential learning to directly award accredited academic qualifications. The Bachelor of Islamic Studies, Master of Early Childhood Education, and Doctor of Business Administration programmes are among the nine.

Enhancement of our learning materials, in particular the development of more than 70 H5P-ready e-modules covering more than 40 programmes, is an ongoing project to make online learning more interactive and engaging.

We have also sought industry recognition for specific academic programmes; this has most recently involved the Malaysian Society for Occupational Safety and Health and the Chartered Management Institute.

Our academics have been keeping busy, as well. Throughout 2022 and 2023, they produced about 150 research publications, more than 30 of which were indexed journal papers. Quite a few papers have even won awards at international conferences.

Along with OUM's creative and technical experts, they have also joined forces with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the

International Nuclear Science Technology Academy to develop courses for education professionals.

In addition, we have made dedicated effort to stamp our mark overseas. Newly inked partnerships, for instance, with Universitas Ubudiyah and Open University of China, will make OUM more visible in the two giant nations of Indonesia and China.

Meanwhile, efforts to reconnect with such international bodies as the Commonwealth of Learning and the Asian Association of Open Universities, and join such new initiatives as the China-ASEAN Digital Education Alliance and Consortium for the Benchmarking Framework for Online, Open, Smart, and Technology-Enhanced Education, will pave the way for OUM's deeper involvement in regional and global initiatives in open and distance learning.



Best of all, we continued to see our learners succeed. More than 10,000 of them graduated over the last two convocations, bringing the cumulative number of OUM graduates to 103,000 since 2004.



The last two years have also seen OUM receiving several accolades. In 2022, we were voted one of Malaysia's best universities for human resource studies (Talentbank Group), and received an award for people's choice in education and learning (Putra Aria Brand Awards). In 2023, we received a five-star rating in online learning (QS Stars) and were honoured as a winner at the Asia Best Employer Brand Awards.

Best of all, we continued to see our learners succeed. More than 10,000 of them graduated over the last two convocations, bringing the cumulative number of OUM graduates to 103,000 since 2004.

Looking ahead, several metrics stand

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out as our key initiatives in 2024 and 2025. Among them are new programme disciplines and concentrations to be introduced, including data science and supply chain management, and intensified efforts to further boost industry recognition. More qualifications will also be made available through APEL.Q to allow a greater number of people from a variety of backgrounds to obtain OUM qualifications.

As we move forward in our journey towards becoming a fully digital university, OUM will develop an integrated centralised data management system, which is expected to improve learner retention by leveraging data-driven insights to track academic progress, identify problem areas, and ultimately ensure learner success. Our in-progress digital transformation plan will also comprise, among others, a smart proctoring system to assure assessment integrity.

Moulding OUM into a university concerned with more sustainable approaches and one that can contribute to greater global goals, we will also be modernising our curricula by introducing new programme and course topics in sustainable development goals, and environmental, social, and corporate governance.

## Cultivating organisational agility

As I think about the extraordinary events that have shaped higher education in the last few years, I believe the key to overcoming VUCA is agility.

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I would like to propose a different VUCA: vigilance, understanding, collaboration, and adaptability.

”

So, as OUM braces for the challenges that will surely loom in 2024, I hope to be part of a team that is agile, nimble, and responsive. For this reason, I would like to propose a different VUCA: vigilance, understanding, collaboration, and adaptability.

To be vigilant, we must remain alert and anticipate changes within and outside our organisation. OUM's risk management approach, for example, should involve preparing for such potential complications as post-pandemic enrolment patterns and changing study behaviours, and proposing in advance the relevant mitigating and contingency strategies.

To best understand where we are, we must be willing to review our institutional performance, be honest about what works and what does not, and invest in competitive intelligence and scenario planning. We need to continue to listen to our learners and stakeholders, as their input is essential. No organisation, after all, exists in a vacuum.

To instil a collaborative spirit, we must strive to create an open, transparent, and supportive environment. Walls should come down and barriers removed. People should be given the chance to excel individually as well as contribute in teams.

To be adaptable means being open to new ideas and changing strategies as and when we need to. Innovation has to be actively encouraged at every stratum as we seek useful solutions and better ways of doing things.

In my hopes of leading OUM to achieve the above, I am reminded of a Chinese proverb that says, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now.” OUM must now be agile and plant new trees of our own, and I hope *inspired* readers will join us as our efforts take root.

Have a productive semester ahead.

Prof Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang  
President/Vice-Chancellor

in conversation

# GROUNDING, FRAMING, AND PROBLEMATISING RESEARCH IN ONLINE, DISTANCE, AND DIGITAL EDUCATION

In Conversation with Prof Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Prof Insung Jung

By Dr David Lim





**O**laf Zawacki-Richter is a professor of educational technology at the University of Oldenburg in Germany. He is the Dean of the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences and Director of the Center for Open Education Research (COER). Olaf has over 25 years of professional experience in the field of open, distance, and digital education. He has also served as a consultant and advisor, including work for the United Nations' International Labor Organization, the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag, and the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat). Dr. Zawacki-Richter has authored over 150 journal articles and edited several books, including *Online Distance Education – Towards a Research Agenda*, *Systematic Reviews in Educational Research*, *Open and Distance Education in Australia, Europe and the Americas: National Perspectives in a Digital Age (Vol. 1)*, and *Open and Distance Education in Asia, Africa and the Middle East: National Perspectives in a Digital Age (Vol. 2)* – all available as open access publications. He is an associate editor of the *Online Learning Journal (OLJ)* and a member of the editorial board of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL)*, *Open Learning*, the *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, and the *Journal for Higher Education Development (Austria)*. His publications are available on Google Scholar at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=-yWppRsAAAAJ&hl=de>.

**Insung Jung** was formerly professor of Education at the International Christian University (ICU in Japan). She is currently visiting research scholar at the Education Research Institute at the Seoul National University in South Korea. With more than three decades of research and practice in open, distance and digital education, she has edited and authored several books with scholars from various parts of the world, including *Distance and Blended Learning in Asia*, *Quality, Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Distance Education and E-Learning: Models, Policies and Research*, *Quality Assurance in Distance Education and E-Learning: Challenges and Solutions from Asia*, and *Online Learner Competencies: Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes for Successful Learning in Online and Blended Settings*. She has served as a consultant and advisor in ODDE/e-learning to numerous national and international institutions, including the Korean Ministry of Education, UNESCO, World Bank and the APEC. See her website for more at <https://sites.google.com/site/isjungcv/>.

## Shaping the field of open, distance and digital education (ODDE)

**David C.L. Lim [DL]:** Congratulations on the publication of *Handbook of Open, Distance and Digital Education [ODDE] (2022)*, the open-access

volume you collaborated on as co-editors-in-chief.

The *Handbook* is certainly ambitious in scale, sprawling over eighty chapters, and covering all key topics from accreditation to virtual internationalisation, and everything else in between, all organised according to Zawacki-Richter's 3M [macro, meso, micro] Framework.

For context, as the *Handbook* states, the macro-level deals with "ODDE systems, theories, and methods," the meso-level covers "ODDE educational management and institutions", and the micro level focuses on "teaching and learning".

To top it off, the landmark volume was completed in record time – in under two years from the planning stage in the early months of 2020, as mentioned in the introductory chapter you both co-wrote.

Can you share the inner workings of how you mapped out the topics to be covered in the *Handbook* and how the chapter contributors were identified and roped in? Were there topics or areas you wanted to include but could/did not for one reason or another?

With hindsight, what was the experience like for you as the co-editors-in-chief? What were the key challenges you faced, and the lessons learnt?

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there is an urgent need for researchers in ODDE (perhaps in other disciplines too) to assure methodological rigour, link their research questions and findings to existing knowledge and theoretical bases, and pay more attention to research themes beyond micro- or instructional-level issues.

”

**Olaf Zawacki-Richter [OZR]:** In fact, the *Handbook* was my biggest publication project during the last two and a half years. Without the long-standing collaboration with Insung and our team of six Section Editors, the book would not have been possible.

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Strong international networks of senior scholars were important to cover the global landscape and the whole body of knowledge of ODDE and to find leading authors on a given topic all over the world. We aimed at a truly international handbook covering perspectives from both the Global North and the Global South.

Most importantly, we wanted the *Handbook* to be accessible for all in an open-access format.

It was crucial to recruit a strong team of Section Editors to edit the six volumes covering the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of research and practice in ODDE.



Even though the scientific journals have a clear focus on teaching and learning in ODDE, it was very important to us to balance the micro-, meso- and macro-level topics in the *Handbook*.



Together with them, we developed a list of potential authors, and with the help of their scholarly and professional networks, we were able to get around 120 authors on board.

Getting such a huge team together was probably the greatest challenge in editing such a comprehensive handbook, but on the other hand, it was also the greatest privilege and pleasure to collaborate with this international community, thereby shaping the field and structure of ODDE as a scholarly discipline.

I consider this work as the current culmination of my scientific activity.

**Insung Jung [IJ]:** Editing the *Handbook* together with Olaf, one of the leading scholars in ODDE, was a great honour for me just before my retirement. It was one of the few monumental projects in my career.

As Olaf mentioned, we strategically invited six highly capable scholars as Section Editors first. All of them have strong networks with other scholars across all regions. We – the two Editors-in-Chief and six Section Editors – reviewed the original handbook proposal, modified, added, deleted the chapter titles in each of the six sections, and suggested possible chapter contributors.

In identifying chapter contributors, we tried to

locate both well-established and emerging scholars who have shown an exceptional record of publications with empirical data and at the same time considered regional, generational and gender balances in creating the contributor list.

As for the chapter topics, I think our *Handbook* covers all important themes and issues in ODDE following the 3M Framework. The *Handbook* also encompasses the past, present and future of ODDE in discussing the themes and issues important to both the Global North and Global South.

One big challenge for me was to manage and assure the quality of the *Handbook* chapters. While a book publication by a global publisher typically involves a peer review process with two or three external reviewers, a large-scale reference book project such as ours did not invite external reviews for the final approval. Instead, all reviews and quality assurance had to be done by the editorial team members.

Each section editor played a key role in implementing the project, discussing chapter themes with the authors, providing comments, editing, assuring the quality of each chapter, and so on, in close collaboration with Olaf and me.

Then, each of us independently reviewed the chapters that were initially approved by the Section Editors, approved only the high-quality chapters for publication and sent the others back to the authors for improvement until the chapters met our quality standards.

As a result of our efforts, I can now proudly say that we have produced a high-quality handbook which is comprehensive and open, theoretical and practical, truly international and diverse, and most recent.

## ODDE against a sea of terminologies

**DL:** Readers will appreciate it being said in the *Handbook* that the many terminologies used to describe what it is that we facilitate may indeed be confusing. Among those listed are “Remote learning, distance learning, open learning, e-learning, flexible learning, hybrid learning, blended learning, web-based learning, online learning, mobile learning, and technology-enhanced learning”.

Against a sea of terminologies, you decided to go with “open, distance, and digital education” [ODDE]. As explained in the aforementioned introductory chapter, the term ODDE is “to clearly mark the historical origin of recent online education, and

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*digital education to capture newer manifestations of teaching and learning with digital media in the process of digital transformation of educational institutions” [original emphasis].*

ODDE, as defined in the chapter, operates “as an overarching term to refer to all kinds of learning and teaching processes in which knowledge and skill base of educational technology, digital media, and tools are used to present and deliver content, as well as facilitate and support communication, interaction, collaboration, assessment, and evaluation.”

Do you expect the term “ODDE” to stop the sliding of the multiple terms currently being used and to ease at least some of the confusion that may arise from the proliferation of terms?

And do you see ODDE as, by definition, converging with the epistemic practices of the “conventional” universities, many of which have become increasingly digital post-Covid-19?

How do you see the term ODDE evolving in the future, given that our practices and our understanding of them are constantly evolving?

**OZR:** Due to the fact that we have chosen to title the *Handbook* this way, we are setting a certain anchor.

We hope that the *Handbook* will be a major reference point for research, practice, and theory of ODDE. I think there will always be other terms in different contexts, but with ODDE we want to set a standard that, as you say, marks the historical roots of open and distance education while embracing modern forms of digital learning on all educational levels.

“

I would like to suggest more active international collaboration in ODDE research to go beyond small-scale micro-level research, especially for researchers from resource-poor, smaller countries.

”

**IJ:** When we began writing the book proposal, one of our initial challenges was to come up with a title that would encompass the diversity of perspectives and practices that have been explored in a wide range of historical and cultural contexts.

After exploring a range of definitions and terms, from early distance education to new, emergent, rapidly growing concepts of online learning and digital education, we decided to use ODDE as an umbrella term for the diverse perspectives and practices in the field.

We did not attempt to offer one clear definition of ODDE. Instead, we tried to expand our thinking about what we mean by “ODDE” and let our chapter authors adopt their own approach to understanding ODDE in an educational context of their interest.

As seen in some of our chapters, the field of ODDE, as well as the term itself, is evolving with emerging pedagogies and technologies.

## Problems in ODDE research

**DL:** One of the first chapters in the *Handbook* that I read was Junhong Xiao’s “Introduction to History, Theory, and Research in ODDE”.

For me, the sedate title of the chapter belies its incisive critique of the state of research in ODDE. Forthrightly, Xiao writes that “it is not uncommon” for ODDE research to fall short of rigorous scholarly standards, and that it is often a-theoretical, lacking methodological rigour, focused on isolated matters to the point of overlooking the bigger issues and lacking in trustworthiness and generalisability.

Xiao then articulates what most in the field would loathe to admit: “These findings are shocking because what used to be the problems in ODDE research remain unsolved today or have deteriorated”.

Of course, none of what Xiao argues is meant to detract from the progress that ODDE research has made over the decades. Still, it raises the question of how widespread the problem is.

Given your long-standing experience in the world of ODDE, what is your view on this?

**OZR:** Although high-profile scholarly journals in ODDE have been available for 40 or 50 years (e.g. *Computers and Education*, *the British Journal of Educational Technology*, and *Distance Education*), ODDE is still a relatively young discipline that continues to develop and mature.

Research initially emerged out of practice, was often focused on single cases, and was carried out by reflective practitioners in, for example, the newly founded distance

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teaching institutions in the 1960s and 1970s.

But I think that remarkable progress has been made, although we also see today quick and less rigorous research on so-called “Emergency Remote Teaching” practices by colleagues who do not share or might not even be aware of the decades of research literature that should inform evidence-based practice in the development and design of online learning.

**IJ:** As several chapters of the *Handbook* have shown, research in ODDE has expanded in scope and improved in quality.

Of course, it still needs further enhancement, particularly in identifying important research questions and employing appropriate methods to seek answers to those questions.

That is, there is an urgent need for researchers in ODDE (perhaps in other disciplines too) to assure methodological rigour, link their research questions and findings to existing knowledge and theoretical bases, and pay more attention to research themes beyond micro- or instructional-level issues.

I believe our *Handbook* will help ODDE researchers understand the various theoretical and empirical bases of the field and identify research gaps at meso- and macro-levels.

## Overrepresentation of micro-level ODDE research

**DL:** One of the chapters in the *Handbook* is titled “Research Trends in Open, Distance, and Digital Education”. Therein, the co-authors, Zawacki-Richter and Bozkurt, highlight that, as compared to the macro- and meso-categories, “the micro-perspective (teaching and learning in distance education) is highly overrepresented”.

**How would you account for the overrepresentation? How is its overrepresentation problematic?**

**OZR:** We found this in various bibliographic studies in which we quantified research publications on the different levels of the 3M-Framework.

It is not surprising that educators are more concerned with issues related to the micro-level of teaching and learning, instructional design, learner characteristics and their needs, or interaction and communication patterns in online learning environments.

But for implementation and integration of ODDE

in educational institutions on a large scale, strategic and organisational issues come in – issues related to educational leadership and change, professional development, student support systems, technological infrastructure, costs and finance, quality assurance, etc. on the institutional meso-level or even macro-level when we consider the digital transformation of entire educational systems.

“

To me, the lack of a theoretical framework in ODDE research is a more serious issue than the lack of theories in the ODDE field.

”

We hope that all these issues are well covered in our *Handbook*, and we highly appreciate the contributions by Prof Tian Belawati and Prof Ross Paul as Section Editors of the two volumes on the meso-level.

With their background and vast experience in their roles as educational leaders and former Rectors or Presidents of open and distance teaching universities, they were able to configure and orchestrate a set of chapters that cover all essential issues for the sustainable integration of ODDE in educational organisations.

**IJ:** I would like to add one point on overrepresentation of micro-level research, particularly in relation to media comparison studies in our field.

Due to the constantly changing features of technology and conceptually and methodologically easy research design, many media comparison studies (most of them are micro-level research) have been carried out in ODDE, often ignoring the “no significant difference phenomenon”.

They tend to focus on media comparison (e.g. online vs face-to-face; SNS [social network sites] vs no SNS; synchronous vs asynchronous tools) without paying much attention to the different attributes of media and other confounding variables such as instructional design and method.

ODDE researchers should move away from simple media comparison studies and rather look deeper and broader into the important issues of technology attributes, instructional design, policy, support and other environmental and cultural aspects.

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## Knowledge production on the meso- and macro-levels

**DL:** The points you both make are well taken. ODDE educators, especially those working on the ground with students, would naturally be keen to research what they know best: micro- level matters immediately related to their practice.

A paucity of research exposure, skills, judgement, and resources may be among the reasons accounting for a proportion of their output falling short of the scholarly standards discussed by Xiao in the *Handbook*, hence the unnecessary repetition of the kind of research in media comparison studies which Insung highlights.



When it comes to the investigation of educational and learning processes, I think – in general – educational researchers should be the principal investigators.



While more ODDE research on the meso- and macro-levels would be desirable, delivering quality output on those levels would also be much more demanding in every way.

Equity, ethics, global ODDE markets, institutional partnerships, transdisciplinary theories, institutional leadership, financial investments and returns, technical infrastructures, and staff development – these are all matters of a different order of magnitude altogether, compared to teaching and learning.

In a chapter in the *Handbook*, Moore even goes so far as to say that the future of ODDE depends on the answers to the questions surrounding such big topics.

Given the foregoing, what do you think can be done by local, national, regional, and global ODDE stakeholders to assist atomised ODDE practitioners – especially those located in developing countries or lacking the required types of capital (social, political, cultural, networking, financial, etc.) – so that they may be sufficiently equipped and empowered to participate in knowledge production on matters that matter most to the future of ODDE?

**OZR:** Even though the scientific journals have a clear focus on teaching and learning in ODDE, it was very important to us to balance the micro-, meso- and macro-level topics in the *Handbook*.

We have two volumes or sections on each level. The macro-level covers (1) history, theory, and research, and (2) global perspectives and internationalisation.

The meso-level looks at (3) organisation, leadership and change, and (4) infrastructure, quality assurance, and support systems.

And on the micro-level, we have (5) learners, teachers, media, and technology, and (6) design, delivery, and assessment.

I think this structure is unique. Numerous authors from around the world who have written about these issues at the institutional and system levels show how diverse the issues are.

We hope that the many macro- and meso-level chapters in particular will stimulate further research in this direction.

**IJ:** I would like to suggest more active international collaboration in ODDE research to go beyond small-scale micro-level research, especially for researchers from resource-poor, smaller countries.

Over the past decades, owing to globalisation, we have observed a noticeable surge in international collaboration in academic research.

International collaborative research tends to promote cross-cultural, cross-country research on meso- and macro-level research topics, rather than on individual micro-level issues. It also has a great potential to promote collaboration among researchers from resource-poor countries and resource-rich countries.

Recent research has confirmed that international collaboration in educational technology has been increasing, but the overall rate of international research collaboration in our field is only 2.05% while that in natural sciences is between 16 and 19%, and collaboration is centralised around a few selected countries such as the USA, Germany, Australia, Canada, and other mostly resource-rich countries.

In Asia, China, Hong Kong and South Korea are more active than other countries. I think these trends in educational technology can be similarly found in ODDE research.

With the growth of globalisation and the advancement of networked technologies, I don't think

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geographical distance and language differences pose serious barriers to international collaboration in ODDE research.

Young ODDE researchers could initiate a small-scale research project involving two to three members from different institutional and cultural backgrounds and consider conducting an institutional- or national-level study, for example.

## Using text-mining tools to analyse research trends in ODDE

**DL:** One of the chapters in the *Handbook* is titled “Research Trends in Open, Distance, and Digital Education”. For both new and experienced researchers, this chapter is particularly helpful in the way it maps out the terrain of ODDE research using various bibliographic analyses. For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the tools for such analyses, could you shed light on what tools are available and how complex they might be for those who are unfamiliar but wish to experiment with them?

**OZR:** Yes, we used a text-mining tool for the content analysis of research publications in various journals to identify and contrast research trends in ODDE.

The tool identifies major “concepts” (terms), how they occur together in the text (co-word analysis) and form a thematic region.

The method is described in detail in a paper I co-authored with Colin Latchem, in which we analysed more than 3,600 articles published in *Computers and Education* over 40 years between 1976 and 2016.

Open-source text-mining packages are also available in R, the free software environment.

**IJ:** I am not an expert in this particular area. But I understand that text analytics helps researchers gain insights from huge volumes of structured and unstructured data, and various tools for text analytics are available for text mining, text data visualisation and more, as Olaf mentioned.

## Philosophy/theory in ODDE

**DL:** In a conversation with Prof Tian Belawati featured in Issue 17 of *inspired*, she observed that a lot of ODDE research is now looking at application and R&D, and not so much on [educational] philosophy/theory.

By philosophy/ theory, I have in mind works by

contemporary thinkers like Gert Biesta, Lesley Goulay, and Jeremy Knox. Where would philosophy/theory fit in the 3M classification of research areas? And why, in your view, has there been minimal focus on it in ODDE?

**OZR:** The theories in the context of ODDE are considered on the macro-level of the 3M-Framework. Thus, chapters dealing with the theories of ODDE are available in the first section “History, Theory, and Research in ODDE” edited by Junhong Xiao.

Early research into distance education was criticised as being atheoretic. But as I mentioned, the field has matured over some decades.

In the beginning, theories from related disciplines were imported or “borrowed” from, for instance, adult education, and then early scholars and pioneers of distance education, such as Otto Peters, Börje Holmberg, or Michael Moore, developed proprietary theories of distance education.

By the way, we are very proud to have Moore as an author in the *Handbook*. He contributed a very informative chapter on the history of ODDE, from correspondence to online distance education.

But to return to the topic of theories in ODDE, Insung has edited a whole book about the theories.

“

Research and science must always be critical and should not be a matter of methodological disputes or ideologies.

”

**IJ:** Yes, my edited book, *Open and Distance Theory Revisited: Implications for the Digital Era* provides an up-to-date overview of ODDE theories and models for the digital age, covering both foundational and emerging theories and models.

It also includes evidence to support these theories and models for various ODDE formats, sectors and contexts, and provides practical advice and guidelines for the future development of ODDE research and practice.

ODDE researchers are strongly advised to read this book and familiarise themselves with the various theories and models in the field.

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ODDE theories and philosophical backgrounds are discussed in our *Handbook* as a macro-level theme. Even though a weak knowledge base in the theoretical foundations of ODDE has been indicated as a problem, our field has several well-established foundational theories (e.g. theory of autonomy and independence, theory of adult learning, guided conversation, theory of industrialised teaching and learning, and transactional distance theory).

Moreover, a few theories have been developed in response to the new and different contexts as network technology-based online and distance education becomes more common.

Such emerging theories include connectivism, the community of inquiry model, the model of extended e-teaching and e-learning spaces, and heutagogic theory.

Of course, there are theories that are borrowed from other fields, including those three thinkers you mentioned.

To me, the lack of a theoretical framework in ODDE research is a more serious issue than the lack of theories in the ODDE field.

“

Various disciplines have to work together to address the complex issues for sustainable integration of ODDE into institutional practices ...

”

A theoretical framework guided by a relevant theory connects the researcher to the existing body of knowledge in the field and offers a basis for research hypotheses.

Good ODDE research should ask research questions that are situated within a theoretical framework, which is still lacking in the field.

ODDE researchers should understand that theory is an invaluable tool to identify and solve good research questions.

## Autonomy of ODDE as a field

**DL:** It is certainly important to emphasise that the popularity of application and R&D over philosophy/theory as ODDE research foci in no way implies that

the ODDE field lacks theory for research grounding and framing.

In this context, *Open and Distance Theory Revisited: Implications for the Digital Era* is an enormously useful reference point for seasoned and novice ODDE practitioners alike, and for anyone interested in gaining an up-to-date understanding of the nexus between ODDE and theory.

The volume serves as a reminder, and as historical and intellectual memory of the advances that have been made in theorising what began as correspondence education as an early form of ODDE and subsequently evolved through several stages into contemporary ODDE.

It also serves as a bulwark against uninformed or spurious assertions made against ODDE – for instance, that ODDE today still lacks theory. Or, worse, that ODDE also allegedly lacks “good research on the best forms of online learning”, this being a maddening position challenged by Jon Baggaley in his paper, “Sandcastle Competitions”.

But as you argued, Insung, the putative lack of grounding theories in the ODDE field is less of a concern than the lack of a theoretical framework in ODDE research.

This, then, brings me to the question of the origins of the theories used to frame ODDE research.

In the long run, to entrench ODDE as a field in its own right, how important is it for ODDE research frameworks to eventually be constructed mainly from ideas produced endogenously from within the ODDE field, instead of borrowed from adjacent disciplines?

Or is the question of origin of little importance so long as the adopted frameworks enable ODDE researchers to formulate legitimate research questions?

Accompanying this question is the larger question of how you conceive of the becoming of the ODDE field.

Do you anticipate ODDE to evolve into a relatively autonomous field in the continental *pädagogik* sense that it substantially generates its own “proprietary” theories and organises itself around a distinctive ODDE agenda even as it remains open to knowledge domains outside itself?

Or should ODDE be seen as a subset of the academic discipline of education in the Anglo-American sense of being reliant mainly on intellectual input from the major academic disciplines such as

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## psychology and sociology to answer educational questions?

### Or are there other ways of conceiving ODDE as a field coming into its own?

**IJ:** To me, ODDE is a multidisciplinary field of study as well as a professional practice.

As a form of educational practice, ODDE can be seen as a subset of education. But as a field of study or a discipline, ODDE cannot be seen as a subset of education or a subset of any other related disciplines. It is a unique field of study.

ODDE and other related fields of study are all connected and complement each other to produce new knowledge in education.

That is why ODDE research has been borrowing various theories and models from other related fields such as educational technology, information science, media studies, psychology, sociology, and so on, and using them to formulate unique questions and add new perspectives to the ODDE field.

On the other hand, ODDE theories and models have also been adopted in other disciplines and have helped researchers with different academic backgrounds see their issues from perspectives other than their own.

I do not see great academic benefit of conducting ODDE research only within the ODDE field or only applying ODDE theories.

**OZR:** I agree with Insung. ODDE is very complex in nature and the various issues related to ODDE research, development and practice on the macro-, meso- and micro-levels have to be explored in a multidisciplinary approach.

But I clearly see the field of education as the overall umbrella of ODDE and distance education as its roots. I remember an article by Manfred Delling in *Epistolodidaktika* about the foundations of the science of distance education.

In principle, however, I do not think that such delimitation efforts are purposeful.

Various disciplines have to work together to address the complex issues for sustainable integration of ODDE into institutional practices related to instructional design, professional development, management and organisation, technology and infrastructure, legal issues, etc.

When it comes to the investigation of educational and learning processes, I think – in general – educational researchers should be the principal investigators.

For example, in a systematic review of artificial intelligence applications in higher education that I did with my co-authors, we found that less than 10% of the first authors were from education departments. In many cases, this is not very helpful when it comes to developing pedagogically meaningful applications.

## Critical research

**DL:** Earlier I cited Biesta, Gourlay, and Knox as examples of contemporary thinkers who produce theoretico-philosophical work of a type that is not normally encountered in ODDE discourse.

The broadest umbrella term I can think of to describe the type of work they produce is “critical research.” For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the term, “critical research” generically describes an array of methods driving scholarly discourse across the humanities and social sciences.

It is found in such areas as cultural studies, gender studies, literary studies, queer studies, philosophy, critical education studies, and critical pedagogy.

In relation to ODDE, and conceptually speaking, critical research may be viewed as the application of postfoundationalist perspectives to study, critique and problematise aspects of ODDE that may not appear on the discursive horizon of mainstream ODDE research.

Or it may be used to examine familiar aspects of ODDE in ways that are unorthodox as far as mainstream ODDE research is concerned.

In the broad field of education, critical research is evident on diverse platforms.

One example is the journal, *Critical Studies in Education*, which takes a different route than the “positivist approaches that presume reality is ‘out there’ to be objectively documented or ‘revealed’ by researchers”, to pluck a line from its statement of Aims and Scope.

Another example is *Postdigital Science and Education*, a journal that situates itself intellectually at the “intersections of technology, sociology, history, politics, philosophy, arts, media studies, critical pedagogy, and science-fiction,” and “welcomes contributions from wide range of disciplines and inter-, trans- and anti-disciplinary research methodologies.”

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Yet another example is the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. This journal features articles that apply critical theory to curriculum thinking and classroom practice in ways that “challenge disciplinary, genre, and textual boundaries.”

Given the foregoing description, would you say that “critical research” – or postfoundationalism, for that matter – has yet to make its presence felt in ODDE discourse?

Do you think that mainstream ODDE researchers and practitioners whose disciplinary training or intellectual orientation is dissimilar, if not antithetical to critical research, are likely to be open to critical research?

Lastly, would you say that ODDE discourse, which is already heterogeneous, would benefit from being further heterogenized by ODDE practitioners with postfoundationalist training so as to bring in new ways of thinking and writing about ODDE to complement existing ways?

**IJ:** Critical research paradigm has been well accepted in such ODDE research methodologies as action research and participatory research in which taking a value position is recognised, challenging prevailing practices and perspectives is encouraged, and suggesting transformative actions for improvement in practice or society is promoted.

I am certain that this critical research paradigm will continue to be a part of ODDE research trends, and that it will be further understood and applied by ODDE researchers and practitioners with proper training and support.

**OZR:** Research and science must always be critical and should not be a matter of methodological disputes or ideologies.

With new and emerging media, technologies, and methods, such as datafication, machine learning, and artificial intelligence applications in education, many unsolved ethical issues, questions of power, justice, and biases come in that need to be discussed and regulated.

However, I am convinced that strong empirical evidence should inform our arguments and actions in this process.

## Future research

**DL:** Circling back to what we started with, now that the mammoth task that is the *Handbook* has been completed, what new projects are you embarking on?

“

Research and science must always be critical and should not be a matter of methodological disputes or ideologies.

”

**OZ:** Referring back to the synthesis of empirical research evidence, I recently did some work on systematic reviews in educational research.

With my co-authors, I also published a systematic review of artificial intelligence (AI) applications in higher education that has received a lot of attention. In this short period of time, it has been cited over 500 times.

Now I receive many invitations from journals to review articles that use the method of a systematic review. However, quite often, the review studies do not meet the criteria of a systematic review. So, the next paper that I plan to do will be an umbrella review or review of reviews to assess the quality of systematic reviews in ODDE and educational technology.

**IJ:** One of my recent projects is related to the application and refinement of the Open Thinking Scale or OTS which measures ‘open thinking’ as a learning outcome of open educational practice (OEP). The development and validation of OTS was recently published in *Distance Education* as an open access paper.

A few researchers are now using OTS in their research to investigate their students’ open thinking development as a result of OER use in STEM education or as a result of OEP in a distance university context.

My next study assumes that open thinking is an attribute affected by each student’s OEP experience along with individual-, course-, and cultural-level factors.

In three different cultural contexts, it investigates factors affecting open thinking development measured by OTS adopting an ecological systems theory.

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## Closing with a book recommendation

**DL:** Last but not least, if you had to pick one relatively new book that is broadly related to education, however tenuously, to recommend to our readers, which book will it be?

**OZR:** I was deeply impressed by reports about floating schools by colleagues from Bangladesh at the 10th Pan-Commonwealth of Learning Conference in Calgary. Climate change is here!

We also need to consider the environmental impact of different delivery modes in education in terms of their carbon emissions to design greener ODDE programmes. To learn more about this, my next read will be *Climate Change and the Role of Education* edited by Walter Leal Filho and Sarah L. Hemstock.

**IJ:** I would like to recommend to ODDE researchers a book titled *Research Methods in Learning Design and Technology* edited by Enilda Romero-Hall. This book introduces both well-known and emerging research methods in our field.

**DL:** Thank you, Insung and Olaf, for the interview. It has been a pleasure.

Reproduced here under a CC BY 4.0 licence, this feature is an abridged version of the original journal article that was first published in the *Association of Asian Open Universities Journal* (AAOUJ) (Vol. 18, Issue 2, pp. 187-199). The latter is available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/AAOUJ-11-2022-0166/full/html> 

# my\_philosophy

my\_philosophy profiles OUM academics, facilitators, tutors, and subject-matter experts, as well as the personal educational philosophy that drives each of them.



# my\_philosophy

Name

**Dr Md Rosli Ismail**

Position

**Director, Centre for Research and Innovation;  
Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education**

Discipline

**Education**

Area of Expertise

**Early Childhood Education; Literacy;  
Teaching and Learning;  
Educational Leadership; Entrepreneurship  
and Education**

Educational Philosophy

**My educational philosophy focuses on four pillars: open access, equality, social mobility, and lifelong learning. Open access is for making learning available to everyone and using technology to reach people everywhere. Equality is about creating a learning space where anyone can do well, regardless of socio-economic background. Education helps with social mobility by giving everyone a chance to improve their situation, while lifelong learning is the idea that education does not stop at a certain age; it is a lifelong journey that adapts to our changing needs and interests. The philosophy creates a fair, supportive education system that helps people grow academically and personally, preparing them for a fast, constantly changing world.**



# my\_philosophy

Name

**Dr Mahani Abdul Malik**

Position

**Senior Lecturer; Director, Master of Early Childhood Programme**

Discipline

**Early Childhood Education**

Areas of Expertise

**Curriculum; Pedagogy, Science, Child Development**

Educational Philosophy

**I believe in being adaptable and flexible in meeting the evolving needs of my learners and society at large while understanding and addressing individual limitations. This approach is especially relevant in open and distance learning, where the dynamic nature of education requires constant adaptation and an openness to innovative approaches.**



# TOWARDS A CONTEXT-SENSITIVE APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH AND PRAXIS OF EDTECH IN ASIA

By Emeritus Professor Junhong Xiao,  
Open University of Shantou

**E**ducational technology (EdTech) is not neutral; it is neither culture-free nor value-free. Yet, despite its assumptions, preferences, biases, and embedded nature, each new wave of hype around an emerging EdTech in the West is immediately picked up by our Asian colleagues in open, distance, and digital education (ODDE) who appear to be eager to escalate the hype to a higher level or rush to prove its equal feasibility and/or effectiveness in the Asian context for fear of falling behind the (Western) world. The latest craze for ChatGPT is a typical case in point.

A search of publications about ChatGPT in education in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest Chinese publication database, in October 2023 when writing this feature, returned around 400 hits with the earliest publication on January 10, 2023.

The number would definitely be far more than this figure if we counted grey literature, not to mention the many “timely” workshops and seminars run by EdTech celebrities to preach their assumptions about the alluring prospects of ChatGPT, which are basically “borrowed” from and/or built on their Western counterparts’ claims.

Imagine all these “researches” were conducted within less than one year after OpenAI released ChatGPT and the earliest “research” was completed less than two months after ChatGPT went public!

I am not implying a wholesale dismissal of exotics such as EdTech from outside Asia; what I mean is that we should always avoid buying into these innovations

uncritically, be they technologies or theories.

Earlier in my piece in Issue 19 of *inspired*, I advocated the contextualization – generalization – recontextualization cycle proposed by Professor Insung Jung of Seoul National University and also lamented our Asian colleagues’ insensitivity to culture or value-loadedness in relation to ODDE.



Educational technology (EdTech)  
is not neutral; it is neither  
culture-free nor value-free.



Recently, I serendipitously read an opinion piece by an Asian colleague, Professor Maria Mercedes T. Rodrigo at Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon, Philippines. Her article is entitled “Is the AIED Conundrum a First-World Problem?” and published in the *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*.

Professor Rodrigo was invited to participate in a panel discussion at the 2022 Artificial Intelligence in Education Conference. She shared her insights on the challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence in education (AIED) in contexts less developed than many

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Western countries, which evolved into her article.

What interests me most is her collaboration with Western counterparts in recontextualizing educational technology innovations from the West in the under-resourced context of the Philippines since 2006.

Findings from her collaborative research with Western colleagues have been fruitful and surely contributed positively to the knowledge base of specific EdTech innovations concerned.

Her experience in this kind of collaboration is, in my eyes, the epitome of recontextualization which involves far more than hardware resources but also takes into account many other contextual factors such as educational system and regulation mechanism, ethic concerns, and socio-economic condition, among other things, in a specific context.

Just as she aptly observes, recontextualization is a contribution to existing research, hence further enhancing generalization of relevant findings.

Lessons from Professor Rodrigo are encompassing as well as generic in nature and therefore of relevance across other Asian countries. For example, the conundrum of AIED is the tendency to perpetuate poor pedagogic practices, datafication, and to introduce surveillance into the classroom, according to the “mainstream” literature in the West.



I appeal to my Asian ODDE colleagues to learn from Professor Rodrigo by adopting a context-sensitive approach to the research and praxis of ODDE innovations imported from outside our local context.



However, “countries such as the Philippines are so far behind (‘because we do not have the infrastructure to deploy AI-based educational applications at scale’, to quote her) that these problems are not even on our radar”, argues Professor Rodrigo who then suggests opening up “new avenues of research and innovation that address pedagogy, cognition, human rights, and social justice” in our specific context, which in her article refers to the Philippine context.

These insights of hers are equally applicable to other exotic ODDE innovations and in other Asian countries. For example, flipped learning has been

a hype for some time, which would be absurd if implemented among students in a poor resource context who could get by only with bare necessities.

What John Naughton, Emeritus Professor of the Public Understanding of Technology at the Open University in the United Kingdom, said about the One Laptop per Child project holds true when it comes to any EdTech innovation.

He argued that technological innovations should not be “grandly contemptuous of mundane questions” and that “in a society where the average income is less than \$2 a day and the notion of children’s rights is as theoretical as time travel”, “giving them books, hiring more teachers or building more schools – or even paying families to send their kids to school” may be “educationally better” than giving kids computers.

Of the various contextual factors hampering the adoption of EdTech innovations in a particular country, cost and access are often ignored.

As detailed my paper titled “Critiquing Sustainable Openness in Technology-Based Education from the Perspective of Cost-Effectiveness and Accessibility”, I reviewed 3,059 primary studies published between 1969 and 2022, whose authors were affiliated to institutions in 70 countries, including developed, developing, and under-developed countries across six continents: Africa, Asia, Australia/Oceania, Europe, North America, and South America.

Findings from my research indicate that only slightly over 1% (n = 32) of the studies took cost-effectiveness into consideration in the research designs and only slightly over 7% (n = 224) aimed at widening access/increasing equity with nine of them intended to achieve both cost-effectiveness and accessibility.

Furthermore, cost-effectiveness was considered from the perspective of educational institutions; none of the studies examined the costs which students (and their families) had to bear. This may explain, to some extent, the lack of sustainability of EdTech innovations.

In light of the arguments above, I appeal to my Asian ODDE colleagues to learn from Professor Rodrigo by adopting a context-sensitive approach to the research and praxis of ODDE innovations imported from outside our local context.

In other words, educators in Asia should always maintain a mindset of context-awareness in both praxis and research. [inspired](#)