IN PURSUIT OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

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 Connexxions)*, a now-discontinued OUM e-newsletter which saw 45 issues published over almost a decade.

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editor's note

Focusing on the institutional pursuit of regional cooperation, Issue 19's missive by Prof Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang, President/Vice Chancellor of Open University Malaysia (OUM), takes off from the recently-concluded meeting which saw OUM hosting the representatives of OU5, a collective of five Southeast Asian open universities, who convened in Kuala Lumpur in pursuit of collaborative research. The missive iterates yet again the action-backed importance that OUM places on building ties and synergising with its counterparts in Southeast Asia and beyond by way of amplifying their collective voice. The same sentiment on regionality as a method that works is echoed in this issue by the Chancellor of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Prof Melinda Bandalaria, who, in a conversational feature, also tackles a wide array of critical matters, including gendered leadership, universal design for learning (UDL), decolonising higher education, and the future of open, distance, and digital education (ODDE). On the future of ODDE, it is potentially gold, speculates Prof Datuk Dr Tajudin Md Ninggal, OUM's Vice President (Academic & Research), in a separate feature in this issue – provided, he says, the universities that champion ODDE are able to firmly orientate towards their institutional true-north. ODDE in future may remain balkanised by language use as it is today, hence impeded in its glocalisation, as Prof Junhong Xiao argues in the guest feature. But it is more than likely to be revolutionised by artificial intelligence, posits AP Dr Nantha Kumar Subramaniam in his techno-optimistic feature.

Live digital and proper.

Best
Dr David Lim, Editor

important dates

SEMESTER: MAY 2023

Senior Learners

E-TUTORIALS 1 & 2	E-TUTORIALS 3 & 4	E-TUTORIALS 5 & 6	E-TUTORIALS 7 & 8	E-TUTORIALS 9 & 10	Final Exams

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
22 May - 4 Jun 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
5 Jun - 18 Jun 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
19 Jun - 2 Jul 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
3 Jul - 16 Jul 2023

Postgraduate
17 Jul - 30 Jul 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
12 - 28 Aug 2023

New Learners

E-TUTORIALS 1 & 2	E-TUTORIALS 3 & 4	E-TUTORIALS 5 & 6	E-TUTORIALS 7 & 8	E-TUTORIALS 9 & 10	Final Exams

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
29 May - 11 Jun 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
12 Jun - 25 Jun 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
26 Jun - 9 Jul 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
10 Jul - 23 Jul 2023

Postgraduate
24 Jul - 6 Aug 2023

Postgraduate & Undergraduate
12 - 28 Aug 2023

OUM PROGRAMMES WITH THE HIGHEST CUMULATIVE NUMBER OF GRADUATES

2
Bachelor of Management (BIM)

1
Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT)

3
Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA)

*As of 15 May 2023

from the vc's office

IN PURSUIT OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

In the previous issue of *inspired*, I touched on relationship-building as a means of achieving progress in higher education. I also shared how partnerships have laid the foundation for OUM to provide learning opportunities to people in diverse communities, and promote open and distance learning (ODL) as a viable pathway alongside conventional or mainstream options. Over the years, we have been privileged to work with like-minded partners in such countries as Vietnam, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bahrain, Yemen, and more.

Having said that, I do believe we can facilitate more tangible, localised benefits by building relationships with our closest counterparts and neighbours.

As a nod to our Southeast Asian heritage, OUM ascribes special significance to our ties with other open universities in this region. Our membership in the OU5 group, for instance, is particularly meaningful as it gives us a unique opportunity to further the cause of ODL in Southeast Asia alongside the four other institutions that make up this group: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU, Thailand), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU, The Philippines), Universitas Terbuka (UT, Indonesia), and Hanoi Open University (HOU, Vietnam).

OU5 is small yet productive: for almost ten years now, the five open universities have cooperated in multi-country research and consultancy projects, sharing of data for comparative studies, and academic staff exchange.

OU5 would not exist if not for an idea that germinated back in 2009, when OUM, UPOU, and STOU decided to work together to share knowledge, ideas, and experiences in ODL through a dedicated journal. This has evolved

Photo by Razif Masri

into the *ASEAN Journal of ODL* (AJODL), which remains an active publication with 19 issues to date.

UT and HOU joined the trio later in 2015. One of the earliest initiatives taken by the newly formed OU5 was the joint development of the Master of ASEAN Studies programme, a postgraduate qualification currently offered at UPOU meant to promote global understanding of ASEAN countries' common historical, cultural, and regional identity.

OU5 meets annually to discuss updates and share study findings. OUM hosted the most recent meeting right here in Malaysia, where research coordinators presented reports on current projects in innovative pedagogy, sustainable development, the Metaverse in effective learning design, indigenous people, and disaster management. In the coming months, the group plans to publish an e-book, and initiate new research on inclusive education, artificial intelligence, sustainable industrialisation, counselling, and preservation of Asian cultures in the digital age.

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> As a nod to our Southeast Asian heritage, OUM ascribes special significance to our ties with other open universities in this region.
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Whether through OU5 or other avenues, the value OUM has put on collaboration stems from an awareness that, in the face of common goals and challenges, organisations would fare better presenting a united front, rather than isolating as individual silos. I personally believe that strengths can be lent from one to another, gaps and weaknesses can be addressed in unison, new opportunities can be shared, and threats or problems can be faced in a concerted way.

In higher education, specifically, collaboration is also a necessary starting point towards realising a regional framework for mutual recognition of qualifications and harmonised quality assurance (QA) standards.

Admittedly, this idea is not a novel one. The

ASEAN QA Framework was established back in 2008 with the hopes of mirroring the Bologna Process in enabling mutual recognition of qualifications across the European Union. Though the Framework has been lauded as a major move towards encouraging regional sharing, it has yet to succeed quite like the European model, due mainly to inconsistencies in domestic QA mechanisms across Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that this crucial initiative will not be abandoned. As I see it, harmonisation of qualifications is one of the best ways that all Southeast Asians, at least in terms of mobility and career development, can reap the benefits of collaboration in higher education.

From our vantage point in Malaysia, we see no reason to shy away from any opportunity to engender a more nuanced understanding of what different universities and countries need, and subsequently, identify the ways we can each harness our strengths to help fulfil those needs.

Given OUM's experience, we could assist other institutions in setting up e-learning platforms, or implementing accreditation of prior experiential learning. In turn, we could certainly benefit from adopting best practices on catering to geographically disparate learners from institutions like UT, or on introducing inclusive study approaches for disadvantaged individuals and marginalised communities from institutions like STOU.

Ultimately, collaboration will always be part of OUM's underlying philosophy that sustains our initiatives and activities, be it for improving teaching and learning, achieving operational excellence, and reaching out to the communities that we serve, or even those that we may not directly serve.

As an open university that strives to embody the open, borderless, flexible, and accessible qualities of ODL, OUM should endeavour to lend support to others, while remaining open-minded and humble about learning from others as well. This, I believe, is the essence of collaborative success.

I wish all *inspired* readers a wonderful and productive May semester.

Prof Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang
President/Vice-Chancellor

feature

NAVIGATING THE UNIVERSITY TOWARDS ITS TRUE-NORTH

An Interview with Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Tajudin Md Ninggal, Vice President (Academic & Research), OUM

by Dr David Lim

Distilling Tajudin

Dr David Lim [DL]: If brevity is wit, how would you describe the person who is the distillation of the flesh-and-blood individual who goes by the name of Mohd Tajudin Md Ninggal, the prominent Professor of Counselling Psychology and licensed professional counsellor who promotes integrative and positive psychology approaches to enhance wellbeing, and the Vice President (Academic & Research) of Open University Malaysia (OUM) whose key responsibility is to navigate the university towards its academic true-north?

Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Tajudin Md Ninggal [TN]: Narratives of who we are invariably betray how we wish to be seen by ourselves and others; they represent the subjective truth of our ideal ego rather than the distillation of an unchanging essence. From this standpoint, I am but a fallible being shaped by forces known and unknown who seeks to do the right thing by his fellow sojourners in life and the One from whom all of us originate.

Photo by Razif Masri

The Counsel of Time

DL: If time is "the wisest counsellor of all", as Pericles the Athenian statesman put it, what main counsel would it have offered you?

TN: If time is the wisest counsellor, then, it has counselled me, as it did Rumi, that one ought to seek the path that demands one's whole being. For me, that path is education.

> " OUM was founded in 2000 with a very specific mission. That mission, informed by social justice, was unheard of in Malaysia at the time: it was and still is to democratise higher education for all Malaysians. "

The Non-Negotiable Constant

DL: At its inception in the late 1990s, OUM was informally self-designated a "teaching university" in an era when it was not only conceivable but also tenable that universities could opt to deprioritize research. Since then the whole academic landscape has evolved radically on the national and global fronts, and it continues to evolve and exert pressure on institutions of higher learning to evolve along or risk being left behind. Private entities in the analytics business have since taken the lead in determining the various performance criteria by which universities are to be measured, rated, and ranked. Governments and their regulating bodies have largely come to subscribe to the analytics-driven paradigm, or have at least found themselves unable to opt out of it. The same applies to other stakeholders, including the boards of governors of the respective universities, employers, and fee-paying learners.

Given the scenario just painted, how do you think universities today, especially open

universities operating as private enterprises, can, on the one hand, stay at least one competitive step ahead of the evolving analytics-driven world of measurement that may at any time throw a curveball at them? What if it were to be made a rule tomorrow, for instance, that publications indexed by Clarivate's Web of Science (WOS) should be more assigned higher scores for valuing purposes as compared to non-WOS-indexed publications – which is already happening in some universities? How do universities, particularly those in the developing world, prepare for such potential changes and, at the same time, remain faithful to the mission that some would say all universities ought to treat as their non-negotiable constant: to serve as truth-seeking institutions?

TN: Although the general understanding of "teaching universities" is that they prioritise teaching over research as their primary mission, that understanding in fact belies the actual variability and complexity of the term. In the US, for instance, the term is often used to describe small liberal arts colleges and community colleges that offer a narrow range of undergraduate education. By design, the wealthier colleges tend to organise exclusive smaller-sized classes and provide a more enriched personalised experience to their learners, while the less endowed ones offer frill-free education. The term has also been used to describe larger comprehensive universities that fall outside the Carnegie R1 (Very High Research Activity) and R2 (High Research Activity) university lists.

Aside from the fact that there are different kinds of "teaching universities", what is important to note, especially for the layperson, is that, universities of all types that describe themselves or are described as teaching-orientated are not necessarily devoid of research activities. Teaching universities might not have the mass of academic staff to conduct the kind of research that requires costly equipment and multi-million-dollar grants, as is often the case in high-profile research in, say, medicine and the sciences. But not having outsized grants, special equipment, and large teams of academics conducting laboratory-based experiments as part of their research does not mean that research is

therefore absent.

At issue here, I believe, is the common misconception, even among some university stakeholders, that research is a fanfare reducible to all the visible signifiers I have just described, entirely overlooking its essence, which is about scholarship and the production of new knowledge that addresses knowledge gaps others have yet to address or that are only now appearing on the horizon as a result of the changing landscape of knowledge. Research as scholarship and the accretive production of new knowledge take place not only in the hard sciences but across disciplines – in Psychology, Islamic Studies, English, History, Philosophy, Management Studies, to name but a few. And they do not always require monumental funding or lab-based experiments done by groups of scientists donning white coats.

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> **The increasing pushback against measurement by external metrics is a reminder that universities are not without agency, and that they could volitionally opt out if their strength of conviction tells them to.**
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With that clarified, it is now opportune to bring OUM into the discussion. OUM was founded in 2000 with a very specific mission. That mission, informed by social justice, was unheard of in Malaysia at the time: it was and still is to democratise higher education for all Malaysians. How? By removing traditional, if not elitist, access barriers and creating opportunities for under-served Malaysian working adults of all backgrounds to acquire higher education. Not only was OUM's mission radical and new, so too were the means by which OUM sought to achieve the mission: not by conventional means within the four walls of a classroom, but via distance

education by leveraging on advances in technology and andragogy, the theory and practice of adult education.

What OUM pioneered at the turn of the century with the advent of the internet was so novel that it took concerted effort to convince Malaysians that this was indeed a game-changing viable concept. Consistently, over the years, with the government's support, OUM embarked on roadshows and employed all media to explain to the public how the new mode of teaching and learning worked, and what benefits were waiting to be reaped. At a time when few understood non-traditional methods of doing higher education, OUM, as part of its operations, was already training scores of tutors and subject-matter experts from across Malaysia – thousands of whom were academics from conventional local institutions of higher learning – on the theory and practice of what has come to be known as "open, distance, and digital education" or ODDE. Before anyone else in the country, OUM had set up and cyclically enhanced what has now evolved into a robust online learning platform that serves as the backbone of its services and that others seek to replicate. From the early days, before research was a trending subject, OUM was already engaged in research on ODDE and in the disciplines related to the programmes it offered, quickly becoming a successful model of an ODDE institution that others from around the globe sought to learn from. Through all this, most importantly, OUM stayed on-course to enable Malaysians to realise their dream of acquiring quality higher education on a part-time basis, without having to forgo their jobs or compromise on their life responsibilities. To date, close to one hundred thousand Malaysians, inclusive of almost fifty thousand teachers in Malaysian schools, have been trained and graduated by OUM. This, by any standard, is no mean feat.

In short, in response to your question, if OUM is a "teaching university", then it is one that has done much more than to "teach" in the traditional sense of the word. In an expansive sense, OUM has helped to educate a nation in an act of nation-building that it was set up to partake in.

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that the world has changed just as radically since

OUM was founded in 2000, both nationally and globally. The plain fact is that OUM can no longer rely on its first mover advantage to stay ahead of the game. Not only is there keen competition from other universities to contend with, there is also the fact that, by the government's classification, OUM has graduated from the category of emerging university to mature university, thus raising the bar for us to deliver on all fronts. Like all mature universities aged fifteen years and above, OUM is expected to furnish continuous evidence of higher levels of financial sustainability, teaching-staff capability, research capacity, student satisfaction, and other quality criteria set by the government.

Also to be contended with are the metrics used by analytics companies to rank and rate universities – metrics that, as you pointed out, have become increasingly influential with many stakeholders in higher education over the past two decades. For all universities, including OUM, these metrics can be useful as tools to reflect on the multiple ways in which performance may be measured. Even metrics like faculty/student ratio, international student ratio, and international faculty ratio – which are inapplicable to open universities that cater to the masses and are guided by their nation-building mission – are beneficial to consider, for they help us to better appreciate the performance qualities prized by others and to reflect on where we stand in relation to the others.

At the same time, it is crucial to bear in mind that these metrics should not distract us from our institutional mission. Even the law schools of Yale, Harvard, and the University of California have recently withdrawn from a popular US ranking exercise due to the methodologies used that are deemed to be misaligned with their institutional values and the core commitments of the profession. Other shortcomings of the various ranking exercises that have been rightly highlighted by detractors include the observation that they are invariably tilted in favour of research-intensive universities based in the developed nations and that they unfairly apply the same standards to all universities irrespective of their founding mission.

The increasing pushback against measurement by external metrics is a reminder that universities are

Photo by Razif Masri

not without agency, and that they could volitionally opt out if their strength of conviction tells them to. This is not to whitewash the fact that the world is structured by asymmetrical power relations, that universities in the developing world may be constrained in ways that elite universities in the Global North are not. It is rather in recognition of the asymmetry of things that universities in the developing world have all the more reason to find their mettle. What are their values and commitments? What do they seek to achieve? And what will they not compromise on? It is essential that they clarify their values and firmly orientate towards their institutional true-north. Better still if they were able to operate with an eye to the future, remain nimble in adapting to change, and adroitly balance teaching and research within the "Goldilocks Zone" that they would need to set for themselves within the bounds of their resources and the expectations of the governing bodies to which they are answerable.

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> Academics in open universities such as OUM are unique for their 360-degree expertise in delivering higher education in ODDE mode.
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The Evolution and Reinvention of Universities

DL: In the early days, open universities were a category of universities unto themselves – one that was supposed to be different from that in which conventional brick-and-mortar universities are placed. That distinction appears to be fast dissolving in the post-Covid era. Open and conventional universities are increasingly converging in key areas: in the use of digital technologies to facilitate teaching and learning; in the teaching-learning mode that may gradate from blended to fully online; in the migration of in-person exams to online exams; in the recruitment targeting of the same pool of learners; and so on. External circumstances have been the impetus behind this ongoing convergence which has given

rise to an existential crisis of sorts for open universities in general. This was in fact already anticipated by Alan Tait who in his essay titled "Open Universities: The Next Phase" cautioned that "there is no guaranteed place for Open Universities in the landscape of higher education: it will have to be earned once again" and again, as the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve.

What are your views on this unfolding? What options are available for open universities to exercise and reinvent itself?

TN: The scenario you have just sketched is real. The key enabler here is technology and we already know that the change that technology brings happens gradually, then suddenly. So, it behoves us all – in higher education as in all other sectors where technology is a driving force – to continually engage in environment scanning, to be attuned to the kinds of technological innovations that are taking place. The idea I'm advocating here is not to jump onto the bandwagon of every emerging technology as the fashionable course of action to take. What I have in mind, rather, is the cultivation and pursuit of an intellectual curiosity in emerging technologies, especially those that have been earmarked as potentially disruptive.

Ark Invest at https://ark-invest.com/big-ideas-2023/, for instance, has identified five innovation platforms to watch: artificial intelligence, public blockchains, energy storage, robotics, and multiomic sequencing (which relates to the gathering and sequencing of digital biological data). Some of the technologies emerging from these converging platforms include smart contracts, next gen cloud, cryptocurrencies, and adaptive robotics. Even if we are not entirely sure about the details of these advances and the precise ways in which they will shape the future, we can be sure that some of these will gradually, then suddenly, impact our lives, including the way we conceive and deliver higher education. The challenge for all universities, conventional and open, is to translate technology as it ripens into practical, sensible, reliable, cost-effective, user-friendly solutions to make teaching and learning meaningful, all within the scope of the institutional mission. This is actually much more

arduous than it might appear, for what is required is not only a firm understanding of the technological potentiality but also, arguably more importantly, a grounded understanding of the philosophy and practice of education, all of which is built, essentially, on our conception of what it means to be human, hence the vital importance of the human and social sciences as disciplines. And this is where some open universities may have an advantage over the conventional universities where adult learners are concerned.

While universities of all types might be converging in the key areas you mentioned earlier, universities that specialise in serving working adult learners may have an edge by virtue of the fact that they would be able to draw on two key resources: first, the wealth of practical experience they have accumulated over the years in working with adult learners; and, second, evidence-based insights from research on adult education in which they have invested so as to better serve adult learners. In the end, though, collaborating, rather than competing, with other parties from our position of strength will, I think, best prepare us for the brave new world that we are on the cusp of entering.

Dis/Parity of Esteem

DL: In Issue 18 of *inspired*, **Prof Junhong Xiao observed the long-standing but under-interrogated craving of open universities for "parity of esteem" from conventional universities, warning that the former should not be "overoptimistic" about obtaining it from the latter. He argued that parity of esteem was not entirely forthcoming from the latter – not because there is a question mark over the distance learning mode in which programmes are run, but rather because, fairly or not, there is a question mark over the quality of the "distance learning programmes run by distance education institutions." This, also, indirectly places a question mark over the quality of the academics behind the programmes. To compound the problem, some open universities appear to also crave parity of esteem for their academic staff who are, again, fairly or not, being measured with the yardstick originating from conventional universities which often prioritise research over other academic-related activities including teaching.**

This double craving that births an existential crisis, it seems to me, is entirely the making of the open universities experiencing said crisis, bearing in mind that not all open universities necessarily face the same. It is their making because they failed to mount a spirited defence of the merits of their programmes against what Prof Xiao calls the "absurd, snobbish and hypocritical" attitudes of those who would question the quality of the programmes on account of them being offered by open universities. It is their making, also, because they did not adequately nurture a research culture in their own institutions from the outset. And it is their making because they failed to recognise, value, and reward their own academic staff for what their counterparts in conventional universities lack: the cumulative practical experience and expertise of their own academics in delivering and managing open, distance, and digital higher education, preferring or compelled instead to esteem the research achievements of the well-resourced conventional universities that are threatening to supplant open universities given the ongoing digital convergence of things.

What are your views on this ironic disparity of esteem that is weighted against open universities? How does one break the deadlock?

> ❝ one of the university's proudest achievements is its alumni community, which is almost one hundred thousand strong ❞

TN: Like it or not, elitism is deeply ingrained in the norms and values of many societies. It reinforces the status and self-worth of those who subjectively locate themselves on the higher levels of the social hierarchy, and it serves as a buffer against the fear of change in an increasingly uncertain world. OUM was founded precisely to dismantle the kind of elitism

that prevents ordinary Malaysians from acquiring and reaping the benefits of higher education, bearing in mind that higher education is many things to many people: an opportunity to prove to oneself that one is no less capable than the next person, an investment in the promise of upward social mobility, a structured way of scratching an intellectual itch, a means of reinventing oneself or carving a second career, a way of honouring one's parents – the reasons are as many as there are learners interested in earning a degree.

Eased accessibility to higher education made possible by open universities' admission policy and mode of delivery has attracted its fair share of cynics and sceptics, including those who still believe that higher education ought to be reserved for a minority deemed to possess superior abilities and talents. Be that as it may, open universities have proven the cynics and sceptics wrong, especially now, post-Covid, that ODDE has become as mainstream as classroom-bound education. Open universities have been vindicated, as have their graduates who have made their mark in the world, irrespective of whether they are esteemed by a minority of elitists, including those from the conventional universities. If there are academics in open universities that still hanker for parity of esteem from their peers in the conventional universities or elsewhere, then there may be cause for them to soul-search to ascertain if the root causes of their desire are not their own lack of self-regard, under-appreciation of the distinctiveness of their institutional mission, and incomplete grasp of what it means to teach and learn.

Lastly, I agree that we should not lose sight of the fact that the kind of work performed by academics in open universities such as OUM is highly specialised and cannot be compared to the teaching-research-administrative work of their peers in the conventional universities. Academics in open universities such as OUM are unique for their 360-degree expertise in delivering higher education in ODDE mode. Trained to practise on a solid theoretical foundation of ODDE, they are actively involved in all aspects of ODDE delivery from curriculum conception, material production, and instructional design, through teaching, assessment, management, research, and marketing, to providing pastoral care to learners facing unique challenges when studying in the ODDE mode. They are ODDE

natives and it was this very fact that enabled OUM to coast through the Covid era while many other institutions struggled to deliver their programmes online without necessarily understanding the whys and wherefores of ODDE. For any person and institution to undervalue this very specialised skillset of ODDE academics and to compound that by expecting them to be more like their peers in the conventional universities, instead of expecting their peers to be more like them, would be to do them a great disservice.

From Silver to Gold

DL: OUM will be celebrating the silver jubilee of its founding in a little over two years from now. Looking back at the close to twenty-five-year history of the institution founded with the mission to democratise higher education, what would you say are its proudest achievements? How has OUM evolved over the years, and what might it look like by the time it celebrates its golden jubilee?

TN: A quarter of a century would yield more than a few memorable moments. OUM is in the midst of documenting the key moments of its journey for public exhibition in time for its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2025. I would venture to say now, though, that one of the university's proudest achievements is its alumni community, which is almost one hundred thousand strong and serves as a testament to the institution's commitment to providing a quality education and fostering lifelong connections with its graduates.

On the future of universities and higher education, it is fascinating to note that many of the predictions are already present today in at least nascent forms: customisable, on-demand education; offerings of degree and shorter-cycle courses; flexible learning; blended learning; learner-focused approach to learning; free access to a global selection of learning resources; and the like. Technology, predictably, will be essential in creating deeply immersive learning environments. Taking these into account, I hope that, twenty-five years after its twenty-fifth anniversary, OUM will have innovated and evolved its mission in alignment with future circumstances but that it will remain always an integral part of the community it serves.   *inspired*

A GUIDING LIGHT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Conversation with Prof Melinda dela Peña Bandalaria, Chancellor, University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU)

By Dr David Lim

On the Open Education Drive and Gendered Leadership

Dr David Lim [DL]: Prof Melinda Bandalaria, you have been a leading voice in online, distance, and digital education (ODDE) since the inception of ODDE as a field, mode, practice, and community. The cup runneth over, as one might say of your career achievements in ODDE. To cite but a few milestones: You are and have been Chancellor of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) since 2016; you led the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) as President (2017-2019); you have been a key contributor to such organisations as the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and the OU5 (a group of five open universities in Southeast Asia); and you have won numerous awards including the 2021 Prize of Excellence (for Individual Contribution to the field of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning) conferred by the ICDE, and the 2021 Meritorious Service Award conferred by the AAOU.

Please could you tell us how you first came into the field of ODDE and what it is about ODDE that continues to propel you through your illustrious career? As a leader,

Photo by Razif Masri

how important is it to you that women are equitably represented in ODDE leadership in general, and in Southeast Asia (SEA), in particular? If you agree that leadership styles are inescapably gendered, what unique contributions do you see women leaders bringing to the field of ODDE?

Prof Melinda Bandalaria [MB]: First, thank you for this opportunity to be featured in your e-magazine. Thanks also for recognising the awards conferred on me, which I consider as validation or affirmation that, somehow, I am contributing to the field of open education.

> "Women leadership in ODDE can provide insights so that the essence or primary mission of ODDE can really be realised through the inclusion of the marginalised sectors of the society, which in most cases, include the women."

My first involvement in ODDE was as a Research Assistant at the Office of Distance Education (ODE) which my university, University of the Philippines (UP), established in 1994. Each major Constituent Unit of UP, of which there were four at that time, had an ODE, which became the forerunner of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU). UPOU was established in 1995, so one can say that I've been part of the organisation long before its establishment as a university. Distance education is very much aligned with my advocacy of making quality education available to many, especially, the marginalised sector of the society. I consider myself a social activist and, somehow, the idea of democratising access to quality education through the distance education mode of instruction appealed to me. UP is known to provide quality education but it also has that image of being elite and exclusive as it can only accept a small percentage of tertiary-level students seeking admission into its various programs.

This advocacy for inclusion in a quality education ecosystem continues to propel me to pursue various initiatives and innovations, which include convincing other academic institutions to join the "movement" for open education by offering some of their programs in this mode of instruction; working alongside policymakers to provide a more conducive policy environment for ODDE; partnering with the industry so we can develop and offer relevant programs that would provide qualified workforce to the major industries of the country; and promoting ODDE as the path to learning for the new breed of learners.

On women leadership, I always believe that equal opportunities should be given to both men and women if they are qualified for the position. While there is a need to recognise the distinct characteristics of a gender which are brought about by biological and physiological features, such factors should not be barriers for women to occupy leadership positions in any organisation. Instead, these characteristics should be considered in designing suitable work environments to bring out the best from men, women, and others who are beyond this binary classification of gender in any organisation. Specific to ODDE, women leadership can be an advantage considering that traditionally and, in some cases, culturally, women have not been the priority where access to education is concerned. There are some culturally attributed practices as well as financial circumstances that may prevent women from attending the conventional system of education. And in most, although not all, cases, it is the women who recognise how important women education is to the building of the family, the community, and the nation. Women leadership in ODDE can provide insights so that the essence or primary mission of ODDE can really be realised through the inclusion of the marginalised sectors of the society, which in most cases, include the women. Mechanisms can be designed that will suit the context of women to facilitate their participation and inclusion in the education

ecosystem and learning opportunities.

Integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Online Learning

DL: In the book chapter you authored titled "Universal Access in Online Distance Education: A Case Study from the Philippines" (2020), you made it disarmingly clear that "all the barriers to education as articulated by UNESCO are present" in the Philippines. Lest it is overlooked by readers, the Philippines is "an archipelagic country consisting of 7,107 islands", with some parts facing natural instabilities, conflicts, and accessibility issues arising from geographical features. Other significant barriers include poverty, physical disabilities, as well as the technological and digital divide resulting from the lack of resources involving hardware and software, language and other skills, and the necessary capital to acquire these.

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> It is therefore important that learning resources in the free online course be free as well, hence the impetus to use Open Educational Resources (OERs).
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> "

As someone who has been at the forefront of efforts to overcome these barriers in and out of the Philippines with ODDE, how would you help our readers to better appreciate the enormous challenges, especially given the imperative and additional challenge to "integrate the principles and features of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in online programs and courses in order to facilitate full participation of all learners"? As context for readers, UDL is a set of principles that "provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone [abled and disabled] – not a single, one-size-fits-all solution, but rather flexible approaches that can

be customized and adjusted for individual needs", to pluck a line from the online course titled "Introduction to UDL" offered by the Commonwealth of Learning.

MB: Well, you have mentioned the different challenges that may prevent an individual from accessing learning opportunities relevant to his/her context. Each barrier may need a specific set of actions so that we can really attain that universal access to learning. Offering programs in the online mode of instruction addresses just one barrier – that is the "any place learning" as long as you have access to the internet. But what about those who don't have access to the equipment/gadget to access the internet and the digital/digitised content or learning resources? What about those who cannot pay the course fees associated with the online course?

In this context, an online course can be offered as a free online course (e.g., as a Massive Open Online Course or MOOC) which removes the barrier of course fees and admission requirements. However, if the content or learning resources used in the MOOC will have to be paid for or purchased, then we are presenting another barrier to learning! It is therefore important that learning resources in the free online course be free as well, hence the impetus to use Open Educational Resources (OERs). In using OERs, we are not just facilitating access and inclusion to the learning opportunity, we are also facilitating course/learning journey completion and, in the process, enabling the learners to access the opportunities that will be made available as a result of course completion. To further ensure inclusion, we also have to make sure that the content or the OERs are made available in multimedia format and are in a repository which integrates at least the basic features spelled out in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/).

Further, as we all know, poverty is a major barrier to learning even if courses are offered as MOOCs. Partnership with the relevant agencies, especially government agencies, can be a great help to address the other barriers to learning. In the Philippines, the government has what are

called Community eCenters/Tech4Ed Centers, which offer free digital literacy training programs and free internet access to the community. Arrangements can be made, which can involve other stakeholders as well, for a more focused initiative for ODDE learners in the community. In the case where learner mobility is a barrier coupled with non-access to the internet, open education can be implemented without an online platform. Learning resources can be provided, and radio and television can also be used for the multimedia materials. We can learn our lessons and draw insights from our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and improve from there to facilitate inclusion and access to learning opportunities for all.

So, depending on the context of the learner, and the barrier that he/she is facing, many options are available.

Truths and Myths about OERs and MOOCs in Southeast Asia

DL: You have championed and written extensively on OERs, as well as on Massive Online Distance eLearning (MODeL) courses offered by UPOU – both as instruments to help overcome access barriers to education. You have usefully addressed the tight integration of OERs and MODeL in, for instance, your book chapter, "OERs for Development (OERs4D) Framework as Designed and Implemented in the Philippines", which appears in the edited volume, *MOOCs and Open Education in the Global South* (2020).

Given the breadth of your experience, how would you respond to the observation that OERs and MOOCs (as the model upon which UPOU's MODeL courses have been designed) have been adopted at varying rates with varying levels of enthusiasm, urgency, and success by the different ODDE providers in SEA? How would you account for the variations, if they exist? Also, based on global trends and UPOU's praxis, how much of the OERs used, especially in SEA, have been borrowed or adapted from existing resources and how much have been produced entirely anew and released under an open licence?

In other words, has there been more usage of existing OERs than entirely-new creations of OERs? Lastly, what are some of the most enduring myths about OERs and MOOCs that you keep encountering and find challenging to dispel, particularly in the SEA context?

MB: You are correct. The level of enthusiasm, urgency, and success in adopting OERs and MOOCs varies. Some possible reasons, based on our experience at UPOU, include the still prevailing copyright mindset of many of our academics, and the resources required to produce/develop OERs and MOOCs.

> "A question like "Is ChatGPT the one answering the online exam questions or are the students doing their own work?" has direct implications on the integrity of the whole teaching and learning process.

In 2019, we conducted a study, in collaboration with the SEAMEO Secretariat, on the adoption of OERs in SEA. The results indicate that one reason for the low adoption of existing OERs is the language barrier, given that most OERs are in the English language. At that time, there was also a relatively low level of awareness about OERs even among the teachers. At the onset of the pandemic when academic institutions were forced to immediately shift to remote instruction, the massive and rapid training of teachers was accompanied with a more intensified campaign to use OERs to hasten the development of course packages as well as to provide free lesson contents. MOOCs were also used as the platform for inclusive, rapid, and massive training of teachers. Our experience at UPOU showed a significant increase in our MOOCs enrolment and the production of OERs during the pandemic. We also promoted the model MOOCs as OERs so that other institutions could develop and implement

their own training programs using our MOOCs as content in the way OERs are used in courses.

A myth common to both OERs and MOOCs is their questionable quality. For OERs, given the ease with which one can develop video materials and share them through the internet, quality can really be a concern. Of course, there are now recommended ways and even QA frameworks for OERs which can guide users in determining the quality of the OER that they want to use. Institutions also have ways of vetting OERs before they are made available on their OER platform or repository.

Since MOOCs are basically a form of distance education in which students are physically separated from their teachers, they also share the myth of being of low quality, and this dates back to the beginnings of distance education. This myth persists despite research showing that distance learners can be on par with students from conventional education in terms of performance based on the expected learning outcomes of a course.

The putative lack of integrity of the whole learning process including assessment of learning is another myth that seems to persist. Because MOOCs, and other fully online courses for that matter, rely heavily on modern ICTs, specifically the online technologies, issues like verifying the identity of the student doing the learning activities and taking exams, using paper mills for completing learning activities, and plagiarism almost always become the subject of discussion. This has become more apparent, and probably more worrisome especially to online learning providers with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), specifically ChatGPT and Bard. A question like "Is ChatGPT the one answering the online exam questions or are the students doing their own work?" has direct implications on the integrity of the whole teaching and learning process. One thing is certain: digital transformation of education should now include a major change in the way we teach and conduct assessment.

For both OERs and MOOCs, the common myth is "they are difficult to sustain" as there are no course fees to be paid by the learners or users

of the materials. However, there are sustainability models which institutions can consider which include among others payment for certification which is almost always assessment-driven, funding for research on open education, and others.

These myths imply that there is still a need to do more awareness campaigns and even invoke the UNESCO Recommendations on OERs (adopted by member states in November 2019) so that governments can also support the initiative, and academic institutions can devise mechanisms to engage in the use, development, and sharing of OERs and MOOCs.

The Role of OUs in Decolonising Higher Education

DL: In your book chapter on OERs4D that I cited earlier, you noted at the outset that "Developing countries are often perceived as resource-poor" and that some believe these resource-poor countries need not and indeed should not reinvent the proverbial wheel by producing their own OERs and MOOCs, given that so much of the same has already been produced by the highly industrialised countries and could be used for free or at almost no cost. The rest of the chapter essentially makes a case *against* the aforementioned perception/belief, arguing, in the case of the Philippines, that it *is* necessary to produce and contextualise OERs to address local needs.

Related to but located outside the scope of the aforementioned chapter is the subject of decolonising higher education which I am hoping to obtain your response on. There are many strands to the decolonising project, one of which is theoretically anchored to the work of Walter Mignolo. Irrespective of the theoretical foundations, though, all these strands share the common understanding that much of the knowledge circulating in global academia emerges from the West and that scholars and learners, especially from the Global South, ought to be critical and vigilant about what they consume, produce, and disseminate as knowledge (facts, assumptions, priorities, understandings,

values, perspectives, truths, ways of thinking and sensing, etc.), for knowledge of all origins is never neutral and even the most neutral-seeming knowledge that purports to be progressive might dissimulate its imperial origin and bent. Based on the foregoing understanding, scholars have increasingly been attempting to decolonise higher education, including the curriculum, this being an investment that has been described as "about being prepared to reconnect, reorder and reclaim knowledges and teaching methodologies that have been submerged, hidden or marginalised" by the coloniality of power, to cite Rowena Arshad in an accessible article published by *Times Higher Education*. There are no easy solutions to the project of decoloniality, but it is gathering momentum across all life spheres, as we speak.

> " Twenty-five years into the future? I would say ODDE will be the default and no longer an alternative. "

Given the position you established in the said chapter – that being perceived as resource-poor should not preclude one from doing what needs to be done to meet local needs – I wonder what your thought are on decolonising higher education in general, and in the context of open universities (OUs) in particular. Taking into account the OUs' ability to reach the masses, how actively should OUs be partaking in, if not leading, the epistemic project of decolonisation? In these contemporary times, should OUs not seek to redress the reality/stereotype that "Innovation in curriculum is not in general the strongest element of innovation in an Open University profile, which has centred on mission and technologies for learning and teaching", to cite Alan Tait in his article titled "Open Universities: The Next Phase" (2018)?

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MB: First, on the issue of decolonising higher education, yes, I think I made it clear in that book chapter what my stand is when it comes to producing knowledge products. But I think I also implied the need to keep abreast of the developments and progress that are happening at a very fast pace in Western countries. What is important is we keep a critical mind about what we consume. Relevance is an important consideration, and contextualisation can be the key to make Western-produced knowledge suitable to our context. Being critical does not preclude recognising the potential of the Western-produced knowledge to be the "seeds" that will yield other unique innovations that can be our contribution to the continuous process of knowledge-building. I believe we have enough supply of intellectuals to do that in various fields or areas of study.

It is also important for us to recognise and cultivate the local knowledge that we have here especially in SEA countries. I believe that we also have something to contribute to the world, especially given the important role that Asia would play in the political and economic arena in the years ahead.

In the case of OUs, I guess we need to go back to the essence of our being and answer the question, "Why are we here?" Does our mission necessitate innovation in curriculum? Probably, OUs should take a leadership role in this movement to decolonise higher education if it is relevant to our mission or, specifically, if innovation of the curriculum would be relevant to our target learners. However, we should also be cognisant of the changing role of OUs given the increasing adoption of online learning. In this context, relevance would probably take a new meaning given the possibility of a wider reach that can go beyond geographical boundaries. If we are to consider the demand from universities to produce globally competitive graduates given also the changing work environment and system, then decolonisation of higher education will have to be rearticulated.

The OU5 Synergy

DL: Open University Malaysia (OUM) and UPOU, with Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Hanoi Open University (HOU), and Universitas Terbuka (UT), constitute the members of the OU5, a group of five OUs in SEA set up to conduct joint collaborative research. I've been made to understand that you were one of the key figures in setting up OU5. Please could you share your point of view on how OU5 came to be, what its mandates are, what its key challenges have been, and what has been its most significant contribution to the collective thus far?

MB: If you were to ask the different personalities now involved in OU5, they will have different stories as to how it started. As indicated in the email exchanges that I had with some of our colleagues in 2013 when I was arranging for the signing of the MOU between OUM, STOU, UT, and UPOU, I was informed that there was already an existing MOU among these universities, together with HOU, signed as early as 2010. This early collaboration, though, was more focused on the development of a graduate program on ASEAN Studies.

For the institutional research component of OU5, I would like to consider the initiatives of OUM and STOU and the inclusion of UPOU in 2013 as the starting point, at least from my perspective. It was OUM who invited me (for UPOU) to be part of the research team in August 2013. The idea was for us to do research on the same topics in our respective institutions. Then we planned to compare notes so we can somehow establish some foundations on distance education in Asia. The first institutional research was on the Importance-Satisfaction Survey. In October of the same year, UT was invited to be part of the group doing institutional research and, in January 2014, HOU was invited to join the group. In May 2014, another signing of the MOU among the five OUs took place in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and research collaboration both for institutional research (on open distance learning) and ASEAN Studies became part of the collaborative work among the institutions in addition to the development

and offering of the graduate program on ASEAN Studies. We can say that the signing of the MOU in 2014 strengthened the collaboration among the five OUs and the formation of OU5 which we have come to know.

Every year, one or two member institutions would host in-person meetings for the researchers to discuss the progress of their research initiatives and identify a new set of research topics for the next cycle of collaborative research. Beyond the ASEAN Studies program and research which are our contribution to strengthening the ASEAN spirit and community, research on ODDE has also contributed to the building of knowledge on ODDE in the context of Asia and ASEAN.

SEA's ODDE Agenda

DL: OU5 is a Southeast Asian initiative, which complements the AAOU, the latter being an Asian initiative. OUM and UPOU are members of both, and both OUs clearly believe that various forms of regional synergies are crucial to push their shared agenda in providing quality open, distance, and digital education (ODDE) to the masses within and beyond their national boundaries. If we agree that regionness is a method that serves, how would you characterise the present state of intellectual leadership in the ODDE field in the region of SEA? How strong a voice on the global stage do we presently have in advocating SEA's ODDE agenda? What is or should be the shared SEA's ODDE agenda, as compared to the ODDE agenda of, say, Latin America, or Eastern Europe?

MB: When we talk of ODDE, I think, or rather, I believe, that our shared agenda include: access, inclusion, relevance, and people-centeredness. We can also say that sustainability is slowly gaining prominence in our agenda, given the global advocacy on this and considering the major role that technologies play in the ODDE ecosystem. To be mindful of the environmental impact of our IT usage should, in other words, soon, if not already, be included in our shared agenda.

As regards the intellectual leadership of SEA in

the ODDE field, I think we are slowly being heard. We are no longer the silent voice in the discourse on ODDE and this has been happening for a number of years now based on my observation and involvement in the global initiatives. The OU5 members are active participants; in fact, we have held the leadership position of Presidency for several terms and as such have been instrumental in shaping the direction of the AAOU. In the global arena, our universities are active members of the ICDE and the recently organised Consortium for Benchmarking Framework and Data Set for Online, Open, Smart, and Technology Enhanced Higher Education which is being spearheaded by Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU) based in Dubai, UAE. We have to consider that our universities represent different contexts in SEA: we have mega open universities like STOU and UT, medium open universities like OUM and HOU, and small open universities such as in the case of UPOU. We may model different strategies to promote inclusion and access given the different economic status of our respective countries and the way we do things can guide countries and economies on how to implement ODDE.

Our combined action and voices (our publications and involvements on the international stage) will pave the way/clear the path especially if we push for the Global South-South cooperation and collaboration.

The Future of ODDE

DL: The field of ODDE has grown by leaps and bounds since the nascent days when the field was known as "distance education" and "used to be the 'private garden' of a small minority of educators who devoted themselves to its practice and research because they embraced its mission and value propositions", to cite Prof Junhong Xiao in our conversation with him in Issue 18. Still, there's a long way to go in our mission to widen access to education to all, especially the underserved. How would you paint the best-case scenario for ODDE if you were to project yourself, say, twenty-five years into the future?

MB: Twenty-five years into the future? I would say ODDE will be the default and no longer an alternative. There are various factors why such can be a strong possibility. For one, the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic is propelling ODDE now; academic institutions have made so much investment in implementing online learning infrastructure, training teachers, digitising learning resources, and so on. Online learning may be considered a new business model for many academic institutions and a platform to respond to the call for these institutions to perform their social responsibility.

In the near future, the Alpha Generation (born from 2010 to 2024) and the Beta Generation (or the Artificials, born from 2025 to 2039) will be our students at the tertiary level. They will definitely prefer a new way of learning, very much different from the conventional way, probably even different from the way we are currently doing ODDE. The way we are teaching and administering assessments are already being disrupted by AI (e.g., ChatGPT). With the way AI is progressing, we may not have to wait for 25 years for the teaching-learning process to change or to be turned upside down.

We have observed how the fast-changing world of work is driving the transformation not only of our curriculum but also the way we deliver instruction and the impact will be felt mostly by the conventional universities. Related to this is the emergence of the gig economy which is already happening in many countries in Asia. We have been talking about IR4.0 since the pre-pandemic period. We have also been talking about IR5.0, and we have started to talk about IR6.0 (a combination of human intelligence, AI, cloud computing energy, human-robot working big data, and quantum computing). Associated with all these is the necessity for individuals to engage in lifelong learning, and ODDE can be the most appropriate system.

We can probably say that the countdown for the 25-year timeline has already started with the commencement of the post-pandemic era. The pandemic pushed (or forced) the onset of digital transformation of conventional universities which should have happened at least a decade ago.

DL: Thank you, Prof Melinda, for the illuminating conversation. It's been a pleasure.

MB: Thank you, also. I am honoured to be part of your series! **inspired**

REVOLUTIONISING EDUCATION WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

By AP Dr Nantha Kumar Subramaniam
Deputy Dean, Faculty of Technology and Applied Sciences

Rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed multiple industries, and education is no exception. AI-powered tools like ChatGPT developed by OpenAI, the American research laboratory, have the potential to greatly enhance the learning experience of students and provide valuable support to educators.

One of the most significant benefits of using AI in education is personalised learning. ChatGPT, a large language model (LLM) AI tool, can offer individualised support to students. By analysing the learning needs, interests, and pace of each student, AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT or any other purpose-built instructional chatbot can provide customised content, learning resources, and feedback. This personalised approach allows students to learn at their own speed and develop a deeper understanding of subjects.

Over the last few years, OUM has been working on developing one such chatbot for this very purpose. This AI-powered innovation has recently been linked to ChatGPT for its ability to enhance user experience, and provide personalised learning and real-time assistance. An early version of it received a merit award at the 2019 Multimedia Super Corridor Malaysia Asia Pacific ICT Awards (MSC Malaysia APICTA).

In addition to personalisation, AI can assist educators by automating repetitive tasks such as grading assignments, quizzes, or exams. By leveraging AI algorithms, LLM tools can evaluate students' work and offer instant, detailed feedback, freeing up valuable time for educators

Photo by Razif Masri

to focus on the more critical aspects of their academic role, such as lesson planning and student mentoring.

> " In the future, what we think of as an instructor could be a derivative of the human instructor and AI-based educational tools, with each playing a complementary role to the other. "

Another compelling advantage of AI in education is its ability to facilitate collaborative learning. AI-based teaching and learning tools can be used as virtual teaching assistants, enabling students to engage in group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and collaborative problem-solving activities. AI-driven tools can guide these interactions by offering insights, suggesting resources, and moderating discussions, thus fostering a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

Incorporating AI in assessment methods presents numerous possibilities for enhancing the evaluation process. Traditional assessment often focuses on a limited range of skills and may not provide a comprehensive understanding of students' abilities. With AI, educators can create more diverse and dynamic assessments that evaluate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as creativity. ChatGPT, for example, can generate customised questions, simulate real-world scenarios, and provide real-time feedback on performance, thus enabling a more accurate and holistic assessment of students' capabilities.

In addition to teaching and learning, AI can also support educational administration. At OUM, for instance, an AI-driven system that utilises machine learning is currently being developed to identify new learners who are at risk of dropping out. With such a system in place, the university can then provide targeted counselling and support, ultimately improving retention rates.

Despite these promised benefits, there are challenges and ethical considerations in adopting AI in teaching and assessment. Concerns surrounding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the potential for AI to replace human educators must be addressed as the technology continues to evolve. Establishing guidelines, maintaining transparency and close collaboration among the stakeholders, especially the educators and policymakers, will be crucial in ensuring that AI is employed responsibly and ethically. Further, with the emergence of ChatGPT, educators must explore innovative assessment models to better evaluate student learning.

Summing up, AI-powered tools like ChatGPT have the potential to revolutionise teaching and assessment by offering personalised learning experiences, automating administrative tasks, and enabling a more comprehensive evaluation of students' skills. Embracing these innovations, while navigating their concomitant ethical considerations, promises to create a more efficient, engaging, and effective educational landscape for generations to come. The future of higher education will likely involve close collaboration between humans and AI-based educational tools. In fact, the role previously played by human instructors alone can be distributed between actual people and AI-based tools.

In the future, what we think of as an instructor could be a derivative of the human instructor and AI-based educational tools, with each playing a complementary role to the other. For example, the human instructor can take a leading role in producing learning content while AI-based tools can be made to manage continuous student support.

Creating a synergy and relationship between the two would allow the human instructors to leave the repetitive, mechanical tasks to AI-powered educational tools. Ultimately, this will allow the human instructors to devote their time to higher-level cognitive and creative tasks.   **inspired**

guest feature

BALKANIZATION OF SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE: A BARRIER TO THE GLOCALIZATION OF OPEN, DISTANCE, AND DIGITAL EDUCATION (ODDE)

By Prof Junhong Xiao, Open University of Shantou

In a recent interview with Professor Kam Cheong Li from the Hong Kong Metropolitan University (Issue 18), Dr. David Lim, Editor of *inspired*, aptly raised the issue concerning the role of English in scholarly conversations in the Asian community of open, distance, and digital education (ODDE), asking Professor Li whether the lack of a lingua franca might lead to the balkanization of scholarly discourse. As a researcher and gatekeeper of both the domestic (that is, mainland China) and international ODDE communities, I would say that the balkanization phenomenon has long existed from the perspective of international communication.

A recent study entitled "Invisible Borders in Educational Technology Research? A Comparative Analysis" (2023) published in *Education Technology Research and Development* <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11423-023-10195-3#Sec1> shows that even "research articles written in English by non-English authors often do not reflect the same meanings in each country, despite using the same words". Therefore, it goes without saying that multilingualism will definitely further accelerate discourse balkanization in academic communities, including the ODDE sector.

Last year, I was invited to deliver a keynote speech in an ODDE webinar. In the Q&A session, a researcher said that she was engaged in a project on 开放教育实践 (which translates literally into "open educational practice" in English) and asked me to recommend a list of Open Educational Practice (OEP) literature to her, a theme of my speech which I knew was new to Chinese researchers and practitioners. She said that 开放教育实践 was an important component of open and distance education curriculum and that she wanted to explore effective ways students could put what they had learnt from course materials to actual use. OEP is a terminology in the English literature which has very little, if any, to do with what this colleague referred to. Examples of this kind are too many to list!

Anyone who is proficient bilingually in English and their mother tongue can easily notice the nuances or even striking differences in meaning between the terminology used in the mother-tongue-medium literature and the original English words and expressions. This is especially the case when it comes to communication between different ecocultural clusters which are formed and distinguished in the light of "the combined role of language, religion, and

geography" according to a paper entitled "Mapping World Cultures: Cluster Formation, Sources and Implications" by Simcha Simi Ronen and Oded Shenkar who identify eleven clusters: Arab, Near East, Latin America, East Europe, Latin Europe, Nordic, Germanic, African, Anglo, Confucian and Far East <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/jibs.2013.42>.

> **"research articles written in English by non-English authors often do not reflect the same meanings in each country, despite using the same words"**

The balkanization of discourse impedes ODDE glocalization. Arguably, anything international is predicated on something local. All ODDE initiatives are both local and international, and should be glocalized. ODDE basically evolved from non-Asian "locals" in terms of both theory (building) and practice. Almost all the established ODDE theories were developed in non-Asian contexts, and mostly in English. For example, the theory of independence, the theory of transactional distance, the community of inquiry model, and connectivism were established by researchers from the USA and Canada of the Anglo cluster, the industrialization theory of teaching and learning was proposed by Otto Peters from Germany of the Germanic cluster, and the guided didactic conversation theory was developed by Börje Holmberg from Sweden of the Nordic cluster. We are justified in claiming that all theories and practices are contextualized at the beginning and will be adopted and applied in other contexts if they prove to be of relevance and value. Nevertheless, generalization is not the end but another means by which theories and practices are re-contextualized so as to keep moving the field forward. This is a contextualization-generalization-recontextualization cycle that Professor Insung Jung at Seoul National University advocates which is also a glocalization process in my eyes. Today, no one would deny the fact that ODDE is a glocal enterprise because no local ODDE initiative is local in the true sense. To glocalize ODDE, we must avoid the balkanization of discourse, making sure the same words mean the same things.

However, it should be borne in mind that the use of a lingua franca, or English, to be specific, need not be encouraged by discouraging research in other languages. It is neither feasible nor fair to ask non-English-speaking researchers to publish their research outcomes only in English-medium publication outlets. Knowledge production and sharing in local languages are far more important to the local communities than in English. That said, the latter medium is essential to contributing to the glocalization of ODDE. For example, if Otto Peters' industrialization theory had only been available in German and Börje Holmberg's conversation theory had not been published in English, they could not have made such a huge contribution to the development of global ODDE.

As far as Asian ODDE researchers are concerned, we face a double challenge. On the one hand, we should not isolate ourselves by turning a blind eye to or slighting research and practice in other countries. We will do a better job if we can benefit from the work of our international counterparts. To this end, we need to master English. For example, not infrequently, in my capacities as reviewer and editor, I have noticed claims of originality and innovations by Asian researchers which are not new at all in the English literature, the coinage of new terminologies for "old" ideas and concepts, and misinterpretations of English-medium studies. Unless we have good research, we will not be able to contribute to the glocal enterprise of ODDE.

On the other hand, even if we have good research and best practices, we need to be able to share and disseminate them with international colleagues as well as to participate in agenda-setting and opinion-leading to fulfil our responsibilities as members of the international ODDE community. Generally speaking, this would not be possible unless our works are published in English, hence accessible to international colleagues.

The world today is a global village. ODDE is among the most globalized enterprises. We need a common language. The use of English in academic activities should not be politicized, for example as a threat to identity or national pride. English is only a tool if we use it as a tool.   **inspired**

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.

Photo by Razif Masri

my_philosophy

Name
Dr Wan Mohammad Ubaidillah Wan Abas

Position
Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities; Director, Bachelor of Islamic Studies (Islamic Management) Programme

Discipline
Islamic Studies

Areas of Expertise
Al-Quran & Hadith Studies; Theology; Islamic Management; Islamic Education

Educational Philosophy
Education should be the foundation that enables us to play our parts in civilised society, so that we can live up to our potential to improve our own lives and the lives of others.

Photo by Razif Masri

my_philosophy

Name
Dr Raziana Che Aziz

Position
Dean, Faculty of Technology and Applied Sciences

Discipline
Applied Mathematics

Area of Expertise
Thin Film Flow; Numerical Method; Numeracy & Online Learning

Educational Philosophy
Education is a lifelong adventure that adds quality to our lives.

Photo by Razif Masri