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Stewarding the Future

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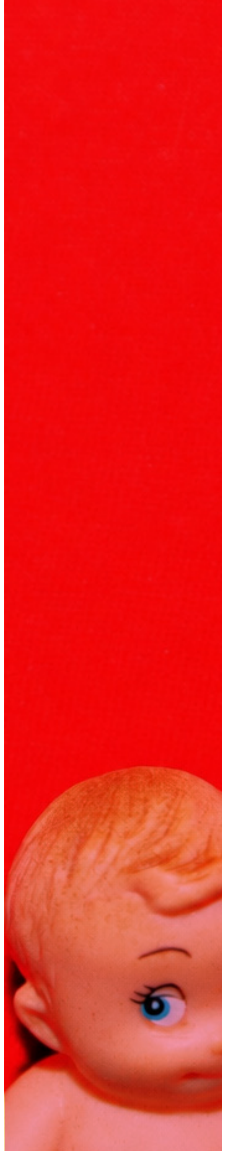

Editor's Note

The first issue of *inspired* for 2026 appears at a significant moment for Open University Malaysia and for open, distance and digital education. National policy is turning toward AI and lifelong learning, and universities are expected not only to respond but also to help society understand these shifts.

This issue highlights work that often remains unseen. In his New Year message, President/Vice-Chancellor Prof Dato' Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang notes that OUM's progress rests on steady, routine effort in teaching, curriculum development, learner support and administration. He links this to the university's four pillars and to OUM's ambition to strengthen its identity as a digital university and a partner in lifelong learning.

The features gathered here take up the intellectual questions that follow. One essay warns against relying on generative AI before learners and professionals have enough grounding to judge its output responsibly. Another calls for more rigorous ODDE scholarship on AI, asking how AI is reshaping knowledge production and whether ODDE still retains a distinctive role in an AI-enabled landscape.

Across these pieces, a common thread emerges. Technology is changing how education is organised, but meaningful learning still depends on careful human judgement and sustained professional practice. As OUM moves beyond its 25th anniversary, this issue invites readers to recognise that ongoing work and to think concretely about the kind of digital university we are building together.

Best
Dr David Lim, Editor

about *inspired*

***inspired* is OUM's not-for-profit journal of ideas on the 3Ps – practice, policy and philosophy – of open, distance, and digital education (ODDE). Published three times a year, it engages global scholars, policymakers, practitioners, learners, and other stakeholders, as well as a general readership seeking the latest insights and perspectives on ODDE.**

the team

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The Quiet Work That Sustains Us

Recent months have seen no shortage of developments in higher education. Proposals for a grading system that measures character alongside academic performance, announcements on making Federal Constitution and history courses compulsory at university level, and the launch of the 2026–2035 Malaysia Education Blueprint all signal significant shifts in the national landscape. The Blueprint's emphasis on AI integration, in particular, is likely to shape academic discourse for years to come.

Photo by Razif Masri

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These developments warrant careful consideration. They will influence how universities operate and how education is delivered. Yet alongside these national conversations, there is another dimension of university life that receives far less attention: the steady, disciplined work that sustains institutions.

> At OUM, excellence is built through routine practice.

At OUM, excellence is built through routine practice. Faculty members and tutors teach, certainly, but beyond conducting e-tutorials they produce learning materials, review curricula, conduct research, publish, assess, and mentor. Learning centre staff across the country work tirelessly to recruit new learners, strengthen learner retention, and provide high-quality support services. Meanwhile, support staff ensure that courses run smoothly, IT systems function as intended, enquiries and problems are addressed promptly, academic records are maintained accurately, and learners are supported throughout their learning journey.

These responsibilities are not dramatic, nor are they often visible. They are procedural, detailed, and continuous. Yet they form the operational backbone of the University. Our commitments to learners, regulatory bodies such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, and stakeholders are met not in moments of publicity, but through consistency.

Such work rarely attracts headlines. Nevertheless, it is this sustained professionalism that has underpinned OUM's progress over the past 25 years and will continue to do so in the years ahead.

As we publish the first issue of *inspired* for 2026, I find it fitting to recognise this collective effort.

Institutions endure not only because of strategic plans or sector-wide reforms, but because of the unflinching discipline of their people. That steady dedication remains OUM's most valuable foundation.

Prof Dato' Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang
President/Vice-Chancellor

Stewarding the Future of Open University Malaysia

In Conversation with Prof Dato' Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang, President/Vice-Chancellor, OUM

Photo by Razif Masri

Tengku Munira (TM): Now that we have entered 2026 and had some time to reflect, how do you look back on OUM's 25th anniversary in 2025? Which achievement stands out most to you, and why?

Prof Dato' Dr Ahmad Izanee Awang (AIA): Last year was an especially meaningful one for OUM. It was our silver jubilee, and we showed that what we achieved over the last quarter century was no accident. I am especially proud that Malaysians have continued to place their trust in OUM: record-breaking numbers in new enrolments, as well as active learners per semester meant we made more in terms of revenue and profit, which in turn means we can invest more on improving what we offer our learners and stakeholders.

The awards we received during and following our silver jubilee year remain deeply encouraging and affirming. In August 2025, we were honoured with the Excellence in Higher Education (Lifelong Learning) Award at the inaugural MQA Awards. This recognition is especially meaningful as it highlights our ongoing commitment to democratise lifelong learning and reinforces OUM's leadership in advancing lifelong learning in Malaysia.

More recently, in January 2026, OUM received the Platinum Award at the Putra Brand Awards. This reflects the continued trust and confidence that the public places in OUM as a dependable and flexible provider of quality education.

Finally, the appointment of OUM's first International Advisory Board (IAB) through the efforts of our Centre for Digital Education Futures (CENDEF) marks a significant institutional milestone. For the

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first time, OUM has formalised a high level advisory body comprising five distinguished international scholars and one local industry expert to support our long term strategic planning as we chart the next 25 years of the University's trajectory. Over the coming years, the impact of this engagement will become increasingly visible in the direction we take.

TM: As OUM looks ahead to 2026 and beyond, what fundamental shift is required for the university to sustain its leadership in digital education amid increasing competition and evolving learner expectations?

> "I am especially proud that Malaysians have continued to place their trust in OUM."

AIA: Across the current post-secondary education landscape, there is a marked shift toward skills-based courses, while interest in traditional academic degrees has begun to soften. Working adults in particular are seeking qualifications that strengthen their immediate workplace relevance. Although they continue to value the broad intellectual foundations offered by traditional degrees, many are increasingly opting for focused, practice-oriented expertise that can be applied directly within their professional settings.

OUM recognises that sustaining leadership in digital education requires more than delivering degree programmes online. It requires repositioning the University from a provider of conventional academic qualifications to a centre for continuous capacity and professional development. In practical terms, this means strengthening our digital capabilities while redesigning our offerings to be learner-driven, skills-oriented, and closely aligned with industry and societal needs. The direction for us is clear: becoming increasingly digitally enabled and deeply connected to the real economy, supporting lifelong learning through flexible, relevant, and professionally meaningful pathways.

TM: You have often referred to the four pillars of

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OUM's 2022 to 2026 Strategic Roadmap, whether in staff addresses, management meetings, or stakeholder engagements. These pillars are growth, visibility, sustainability, and harmony. How do they guide the University's priorities and inform its strategic decision making in the years ahead?

> "Across the current post-secondary education landscape, there is a marked shift toward skills-based courses, while interest in traditional academic degrees has begun to soften."

AIA: The four pillars you mention are crucial and interconnected for OUM. Together, they serve as a unified compass for our decision-making. Growth ensures that we continue expanding access to quality, flexible education, particularly through digital innovation, industry-aligned programmes, and lifelong learning pathways. Visibility strengthens our reputation as a credible leader in open, distance, and digital education (ODDE) nationally and internationally. It calls on us to highlight our academic strengths, research contributions, and technological innovation. Sustainability keeps us disciplined. Every initiative we pursue must be financially sound, operationally efficient, and aligned with long-term institutional resilience. Finally, harmony reminds us that our greatest asset is our people: our staff, learners, and partners. We are committed to cultivating a culture of collaboration, inclusivity, and shared purpose. In essence, when we make strategic decisions, we ask: Does this enable responsible growth? Does it enhance our standing? Is it sustainable? And does it strengthen our community? When all four pillars are aligned, we know we are moving in the right direction.

TM: With the continued rise of digital learning, how is OUM evolving its open and distance learning heritage to meet changing learner expectations?

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AIA: The continued rise of digital learning is not a departure from our open and distance learning heritage; rather, it deepens and reinterprets it. For us, "open" has always meant widening access and removing structural barriers. "Distance" has meant flexibility in time, place, and pace. "Digital" now provides the infrastructure through which those principles can be realised more intelligently and at greater scale.

Today's learners increasingly expect flexibility, personalisation, and clear relevance of their studies to their careers. In response, we are moving beyond simply delivering online content to building learner-centred digital ecosystems. This includes adaptive learning tools, data-informed academic support, and more flexible pathways such as micro-credentials and stackable programmes.

We are leveraging digital platforms, analytics, and emerging technologies to tailor learning journeys, enabling learners to progress at their own pace, build skills in real time, and connect their studies directly to workplace demands. We are also strengthening engagement through interactive platforms and collaborative online environments, ensuring that digital learning remains human, supportive, and outcome-driven.

In this sense, we are not moving away from ODL. We are advancing it. OUM is evolving from a provider of distance education into a digitally integrated platform for lifelong, skills-focused learning that is accessible, responsive, and aligned with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

"The continued rise of digital learning is not a departure from our open and distance learning heritage; rather, it deepens and reinterprets it."

TM: Adaptability and collaboration have been key to OUM's success. What role do faculty and staff play in driving this transformation, and how does a strong culture of harmony support that effort in OUM's unique operating environment?

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AIA: In an ODDE environment, academics are not just subject matter experts; they are learning designers, facilitators, mentors, and innovators. They continuously adapt curricula to industry needs, embrace digital pedagogies, and experiment with new technologies to enhance learner engagement.

Our administrative and support teams are equally critical. They ensure seamless learner experiences, strengthen partnerships, optimise systems, and sustain the operational agility that allows OUM to respond quickly to change.

However, transformation can only be sustained within a strong culture, and that is where our harmony pillar becomes essential. Allow me to highlight what harmony means at OUM: open communication and mutual respect; shared accountability toward institutional goals; inclusive leadership that values diverse perspectives; and continuous professional development and wellbeing support.

> “harmony cannot be achieved by chance. It requires intentional leadership, clear values, and regular engagement across all levels of the institution.”

As you can surmise from these points, harmony cannot be achieved by chance. It requires intentional leadership, clear values, and regular engagement across all levels of the institution.

At OUM, we recognise that when faculty and staff feel trusted and empowered, and can work together toward a common purpose, adaptability becomes natural and collaboration becomes a strength. That is how OUM sustains transformation while preserving the human spirit at the heart of education.

TM: What do you see as the most significant challenges facing OUM, and higher education more broadly, in the next few years, and how is the university positioning itself to respond to them?

AIA: At OUM and indeed across higher education,

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I believe the next few years will be defined by three major challenges.

First, accelerating technological disruption. Artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital platforms are reshaping how knowledge is delivered and how skills are acquired. Universities must continuously adapt curricula, assessment models, and teaching approaches to remain relevant. At OUM, we are investing in digital innovation, strengthening AI-enabled learning tools, and redesigning programmes to focus on skills and real-world application.

> “Everything we do this year, and in the years ahead, is ultimately dedicated to nation-building.”

Second, changing learner expectations. Today’s learners demand flexibility, affordability, and clear career outcomes. Traditional degree structures alone are no longer sufficient. So, we are expanding micro-credentials, stackable pathways, and industry-aligned programmes to meet these evolving needs.

Third, financial and operational sustainability. Increased competition, regulatory pressures, and cost sensitivities require universities to operate with greater agility and discipline. OUM is enhancing operational efficiency, diversifying revenue streams, and strengthening governance to ensure long-term resilience.

More broadly, higher education must redefine its value proposition: institutions must move from being a one-time provider of degrees to becoming a lifelong learning partner.

In 2026 and beyond, OUM is positioning not merely to react to these changes, but to lead within them. We will do so by remaining mission-driven, technologically responsive, financially prudent, and deeply committed to widening access to quality education.

TM: One last question, Dato’. When we look back on 2026 and the years that follow, what would make you say that OUM has succeeded

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in this next chapter of its journey?

AIA: I hope that, some years from now, with the benefit of hindsight, we will measure our success by the contribution we have made to the nation.

Everything we do this year, and in the years ahead, is ultimately dedicated to nation-building. When people come to study at OUM, we want them not only to better themselves personally and professionally, but also to appreciate how their learning contributes to the needs of the Malaysian economy, workforce, and society. I also hope we will look back with pride on how OUM has consistently given back, whether through our tax and zakat contributions or through financial assistance to those in need.

Finally, I hope 2026 will be remembered as the year we firmly established a distinctive identity as a digital university, one that continues to provide access through affordable, flexible modes of learning, while championing a lifelong learning culture in Malaysia and across the region.

TM: Thank you very much, Dato', for taking the time to do this interview.

AIA: Thank you. It's been my pleasure. inspired

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Don't Encourage People to Run Before They Can Walk: Rethinking Some GenAI Paradoxes

By

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and

David Lim,
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Recent debates on the use of generative AI in research, teaching, and learning have increasingly framed AI assistance through the lenses of transparency and intellectual humility. Within this framing, the use of AI tools is often presented as a legitimate response to uncertainty or gaps in one's knowledge, provided that such use is disclosed and undertaken in good faith. Admitting "I'm not sure" and seeking assistance is rightly seen as a professional virtue rather than a failing.

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While this position is intuitively appealing, it risks obscuring a more fundamental issue: the situated appropriateness of AI use. The question is not merely whether AI assistance is transparently acknowledged or motivated by humility, but whether its use is appropriate given the user's level of intellectual and professional readiness. AI tools are not universally benign aids. In some contexts, their use may undermine rather than support sound judgement.

At the heart of this issue lies a simple but often overlooked paradox. To verify, evaluate, or improve AI-generated outputs in a given domain, one must already possess sufficient expertise in that domain. This is not a controversial claim but a matter of common sense. Current AI systems, including the most advanced generative models, are well known to produce errors, omissions, and fabrications. Their outputs therefore require meaningful human oversight. That oversight cannot be performed adequately by someone who lacks the relevant knowledge and experience.

This paradox becomes especially clear when considering the use of AI tools for academic writing and research. It is frequently suggested that researchers who are less confident in a topic or in academic writing can rely on AI to identify literature, generate summaries, or improve language, provided they "check the sources" or "take responsibility for the final output." Yet this raises an obvious question: if a researcher does not already have sufficient expertise in the topic or the language, how can they reliably judge the accuracy, completeness, or quality of what the AI produces? If they are able to evaluate the output confidently, one might reasonably ask what substantive problem the AI is solving in the first place.

The same paradox becomes even more visible in teaching and learning contexts. Advocates of generative AI in teaching sometimes argue that traditional skills such as writing essays or literature reviews are becoming less important, and that students should instead be taught to analyse, critique, and improve AI-generated texts. However, this proposal collapses under scrutiny. If students do not already know how to write a coherent essay or literature review themselves, they are not in a position to judge whether an AI-generated version is any good, let alone to revise and improve it meaningfully. One cannot critically evaluate a practice one has never mastered.

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> "AI tools are not universally benign aids."

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A similar logic applies to teachers' use of AI-generated lesson plans. Lesson planning is a core professional responsibility, central to pedagogical judgement and instructional quality. If a teacher is capable of designing sound lesson plans, the value of outsourcing this work to AI and then spending time correcting and refining the output is questionable. If a teacher is not capable of designing sound lesson plans, then they are not in a position to evaluate or improve AI-generated ones. In this case, the issue is not efficiency but professional competence. The uncritical use of such tools risks contributing to the erosion of pedagogical autonomy and professional judgement.

None of this is to deny the powerful affordances of generative AI for research and education. Nor is it to argue against personal experimentation or individual choice. People may find AI tools useful or unhelpful in different ways, and those decisions can reasonably remain personal. The problem arises when individual experiences are presented, implicitly or explicitly, as general recommendations. Framing AI use as universally appropriate risks doing a disservice to those who are not yet intellectually or professionally prepared to engage with these tools critically and responsibly.

Transparency and intellectual humility are important scholarly virtues. However, they are not sufficient conditions for responsible AI use. What matters at least as much is expertise, understood not as elitism but as the capacity to exercise informed judgement. Without such capacity, claims of responsible or ethical AI use become fragile.

The broader lesson is straightforward: generative AI does not eliminate the need for foundational skills, disciplinary knowledge, or professional competence. On the contrary, it amplifies their importance. Encouraging people to rely on AI before they have learned to walk on their own risks confusing assistance with understanding, and convenience with competence. In discussions of AI adoption in research and education, greater attention must therefore be paid not only to how AI is used, but to who is ready to use it, in what contexts, and with what forms of responsibility.

“generative AI does not eliminate the need for foundational skills, disciplinary knowledge, or professional competence.”

If Not Us, Then Who? Critical ODDE Scholarship in an AI-Enabled World

By Paul Prinsloo
Professor Extraordinaire, University of South Africa
Senior Fellow, Open University Malaysia

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A changing field with questions, looking for answers

Throughout human history, literature has offered recurring images of individuals or communities waiting for a leader or hero, whether male or female, to deliver them from their circumstances or to provide direction, clarity, or hope. We might think of Draupadi in the ancient Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* (c. 400 CE), Cassandra in Homer's *Iliad* (late 8th or early 7th century BC), or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), in which Vladimir and Estragon wait for the promised arrival of Godot, who never comes.

Open, distance and digital education (ODDE), as phenomenon, research focus, and praxis, is no different. The field has long depended on scholars who have offered critical insights and developed conceptual and theoretical frameworks to help us understand particular phases, practices, and transformations within ODDE.

> "there is an urgent need for critical scholarship capable of mapping the contours, tensions, and possibilities of AI-enabled ODDE."

In light of the unprecedented impact of artificial intelligence (AI), and specifically generative AI (GenAI), on education in general and ODDE in particular, there is an urgent need for critical scholarship capable of mapping the contours, tensions, and possibilities of AI-enabled ODDE.

With the retirement or passing of some of the field's most prominent theoretical and conceptual thinkers, we are now compelled to ask who will take up this work. We are looking for individuals and communities able to grapple with key questions in AI-enabled ODDE, among them:

- Who will provide the theoretical and conceptual grounding for ODDE in an AI-enabled world?

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- To what extent does ODDE remain distinctive, in practice or in theory, in an AI-enabled landscape? Has AI levelled or erased the distinctions that once structured our understanding of different modes of educational provision?
- What aspects of AI-enabled ODDE remain poorly understood, particularly regarding the "open" and "distance" dimensions of the field?

Looking back

Long before Covid-19 and the rapid expansion of online educational delivery, scholars were already grappling with the impact of institutional distance, the asynchronous nature of the educational relationship between students and teachers, and the technologies that mediated this relationship.

Scholars, researchers, and practitioners such as Börje Holmberg, Otto Peters, Greville Rumble, Terry Anderson, Tony Bates, Asha Kanwar, Stephen Downes, Martha Cleveland-Innes, Insung Jung, Alan Tait, Melinda Bandalaria, Xiao Junhong, Chandra Gunawardena, Jenny Glennie, and Olaf Zawacki-Richter, to mention but a few, have been crucial in helping us understand open and distance education as both phenomenon and praxis.

Some of the conceptual work that shaped our understanding of the field includes Otto Peters' framing of distance learning as a revolutionary "industrialised system," in which the design, development, and delivery of learning resemble an assembly line organised around specialised expertise. This model was central to enabling learning at scale and continues to inform large open and distance education institutions.

Börje Holmberg conceptualised distance education as a "guided didactic conversation," foregrounding the relational dimension of learning materials and support. Martha Cleveland-Innes later extended this work into online contexts through the "community of inquiry" framework, emphasising social, cognitive, and teaching presence in the design of quality online learning.

These are only a few among many foundational contributions that have shaped open and distance education as both field and practice. Yet the

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formation of this canon has not been neutral.

While T*he Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning* (2023) by Susan Bainbridge and Norine Wark addresses the dominance of men in published research in the field, much of the theorisation and conceptualisation still originates in the Global North or Minority World. Research from scholars in the Majority World or Global South remains either absent, marginalised, or dismissed as derivative or of lesser quality.

Looking at the present

If looking back reminds us of the intellectual depth of ODDE and the contested formation of its canon, looking at the present reveals a related but more immediate concern: the erosion of historical memory and theoretical grounding in contemporary practice.

> “Who will provide the theoretical and conceptual grounding for ODDE in an AI-enabled world?”

It would be disingenuous, in any serious engagement with ODDE to ignore the work of the early pioneers. Yet it remains unclear to what extent managerial teams in ODDE institutions, as well as regulators and policymakers, are acquainted with and meaningfully engage the field’s historical and contemporary scholarship.

There is evidence that institutional leaders often seek to replicate so-called “best practices” without sufficient attention to context, despite longstanding warnings from scholars such as Greville Rumble that what works in one setting may not translate easily to another.

Rumble’s work on the cost structures of online distance education remains particularly salient, especially his demonstration that online provision is not necessarily cheaper than residential or more traditional forms of educational delivery.

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Alongside this institutional amnesia, questions about the depth and rigour of some contemporary ODDE research further complicate the picture.

Much recent work appears insufficiently anchored in the field's empirical, conceptual, and theoretical foundations. Early career researchers, in particular, may engage ODDE without a grounded understanding of its historical debates and theoretical traditions, producing studies that lack analytical depth and contextual sensitivity.

This lack of a rooted and critical understanding of the history and theories informing ODDE may help explain why educators, managers, regulators, and policymakers are so easily swayed by commercial educational technology (EdTech) companies.

Many of these companies promise quick solutions while their primary interest lies not in improving education, but in capitalising, both literally and figuratively, on individuals, procurement departments, committees, and governments seeking rapid transformation.

In such contexts, polished PowerPoint presentations and persuasive sales narratives can easily eclipse more cautious, research-informed judgement.

Looking at the future

While technology has always been part and parcel of ODDE's journey, the real and commercially orchestrated urgency with which AI and GenAI arrived, hammering at the doors of educational institutions, created panic, if not havoc.

There was little time to pause and reflect on deeper questions left unattended while institutions rushed to identify the best proctoring and AI-detection tools, of course at a price.

Among the questions that most ODDE institutions have not adequately reflected upon is how Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT and its ilk, are changing the very definition of being human, the production and verification of knowledge, and the processes of coming-to-know.

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> To what extent is ODDE in AI-enabled ODDE still unique, whether in practice or in theory?

Supported and encouraged by regimes of publish-or-perish and research rankings, much of the ODDE research produced in response to GenAI has focused, inter alia, on student and staff perceptions of GenAI, documenting their use of LLMs, examining the impact of LLMs on assessment, both formative and summative, and exploring the adoption of tools such as ChatGPT in creating curricula, teaching materials, and student support.

Without negating the possible value of this research, we must ask where deeper inquiry is taking place into how our definitions of knowledge, as produced by research, subjected to criteria of rigour and trustworthiness, and validated through peer review, have changed and are changing as we speak.

How is the mechanisation and automation of knowledge production reshaping our roles and our raison d'être? To what extent is ODDE in AI-enabled ODDE still unique, whether in practice or in theory, or has AI levelled or erased the distinctions that structured our understanding of different modes of educational delivery?

And finally, what aspects of AI-enabled ODDE remain poorly understood, especially the "open" and "distance" elements of ODDE?

Waiting for Draupadi, Cassandra and/or Godot

Without technology, ODDE-at-scale is unthinkable. That same dependence on technological infrastructure is now being extended, as higher education institutions, including those offering ODDE, enter into agreements with companies behind LLMs, such as OpenAI and Microsoft, and integrate AI into their core processes, whether administrative, research or academic.

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In 2025 alone, several high-profile agreements signalled this shift. The University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, announced that it had purchased 10,000 licences, making OpenAI's ChatGPT Edu available to all fixed-term and permanent staff.

During the same year, OpenAI entered into agreements with a number of American universities, including Harvard University, aimed at discovering and developing new applications for AI in higher education.

> "the core of higher education is increasingly being designed around AI as platform"

La Trobe University in Australia entered into a partnership with OpenAI to provide 40,000 licences by 2027, while Oxford University secured agreements providing access to research grant funding, enterprise-level security, and advanced AI tools to enhance teaching, learning and research.

Within ODDE specifically, the newly established Open University of Kenya signed a memorandum of understanding with MindHYVE.ai, Inc., a U.S.-based AI company, in what was described as a strategic collaboration focused on advancing AI-powered learning enablement and academic innovation.

These developments are not merely institutional transactions. OpenAI has articulated ambitions to develop what it terms AI-native universities, personalising learning, automating administrative functions, and preparing graduates for an AI-driven job market.

What we are witnessing, therefore, is not simply the adoption of new tools, but the gradual reconfiguration of higher education, including ODDE, around AI as platform.

These developments suggest that the core of higher education is increasingly being designed around AI as platform, shaping curriculum development, teaching, learning and assessment. Soon, higher education, including ODDE, may risk

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becoming obsolete in its current form.

The deeper issue, however, is this: Who will provide the theoretical, conceptual and empirical grounding for ODDE in an AI-enabled world? If ODDE researchers do not rise to the occasion, who will?

There is ample evidence of managerial teams assuming that practices can simply be copied and transplanted from other institutions or contexts, despite repeated demonstrations that this rarely works. The danger is that managerial teams, regulators and policymakers may be held captive by the gaze of commercial EdTech, relinquishing core capabilities in pursuit of what is presented as innovation.

The real challenge, though, is not managerial but intellectual. It concerns, above all, the kind of scholarship we produce, the questions we choose to ask, and the silences we allow to persist. For it is scholars who should set the agenda, not administrators.

> “Claims that AI democratises access to knowledge must be interrogated: whose knowledge, under what conditions, and at what premium?”

Where, then, are the Draupadis and the Cassandras? Are we waiting in vain for Godot?

If we are waiting, perhaps we should first examine our own scholarship.

Too much of the current research on AI in ODDE lacks originality and scientific rigour. As the pressure to publish or perish intensifies, we must resist the temptation to pursue “easy” studies on perceptions of GenAI, adoption of tools, or questions of assessment integrity. These issues matter, but they do not exhaust what is at stake as AI becomes the platform in ODDE.

The early history of open and distance education

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showed how revolutionary it was, offering access, flexibility and guided support to excluded students. Against this history, we must now ask whether open and distance education is in danger of becoming simply another form of digital education on the same platforms, offering the same qualifications and pedagogical strategies, including an obsession with synchronous teaching that replicates residential education while marginalising asynchronous options.

If the revolutionary promise risks dilution, the task is to rethink it under radically altered conditions.

How does ODDE-at-scale respond to a radically reconfigured landscape of knowing and coming to know? How does AI allow it to humanise flexible and responsive education for those still excluded from traditional provision and credentialing?

There are also difficult and potentially dangerous issues we should not avoid, such as agreements between institutions and commercial LLM providers. What does ODDE gain, and what do we give away in return? Claims that AI democratises access to knowledge must be interrogated: whose knowledge, under what conditions, and at what premium?

There is urgency in the air. We cannot keep waiting for Godot, Draupadi or Cassandra.

If not us, then who? inspired

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