

inspired

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Beyond Standard Scripts in Digital Education

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Editor's Note

Every field has its standard scripts, the received ways of thinking that come, over time, to feel like the only ones available. In digital education, those scripts are written largely in the language of scale, efficiency, and personalisation, and we have been performing them so faithfully, for so long, that some of us have forgotten they were ever written at all. Yet every script has an author. The questions worth asking are who wrote them, in which rooms, and for whose benefit, and whether they are standard for everyone or only for some, remaining foreign to the rest of us, who are expected to receive them with gratitude.

This issue gathers people writing their own.

Chief among them are our five new Global Fellows for the 2026 to 2027 cycle, introduced in the pages that follow. On 5 August, at Tun Dr Ismail Hall, they delivered the lectures of our Second Annual Public Lecture Series, each taking up the theme *Beyond Standard Scripts* from a distinct vantage point. Prof Lim Cher Ping asked what we lose when we build teacher development for the many and call it scale. Prof Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi asked who gets left out when we build AI for everyone. Prof George Veletsianos questioned our obsession with speed, and what learning loses when everything is measured by the time it saves. Prof Felicitas Macgilchrist began, unexpectedly, with rage, and turned it towards care. Prof Bart Rienties asked whether, if we were to invent the university today, it would look anything like the one we have. This issue offers a glimpse of that day, and two of the Fellows have contributed essays that carry their arguments further.

Also featured here are the inaugural Fellows of our Southeast Asia Fellowship, and it is in their work that the theme feels most alive. These are early and mid-career scholars asking Southeast Asia's own questions about its own digital future: gendered memory in Indonesia, platform labour in the Philippines, heritage and data in Cambodia, disability and access in Malaysia, and, in Thailand, the understanding of *khwan*, the life essence that scatters under the speed of digital life and must be called back collectively, set against a sociodigital future built for throughput rather than care. None of this is settled ground. It is being thought at the very edge of the field and, over the coming year, transformed into immersive works that will open at REXKL in December.

What holds these contributions together is a conviction that the future of digital education is not something that simply unfolds before us. It is authored. A public that is not part of the conversation about the education it receives does not get to shape that future. It merely inherits it.

I hope you will read on and, wherever your own work lies, take up the pen.

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.

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Contemplating the Future of Digital Education

By design, OUM's story is one that is continuously evolving. Fully cognisant that technologies, institutions, and teaching and learning practices will continue to change, we recognise the need to think carefully about the future. Central to this endeavour is the work of the Centre for Digital Education Futures (CENDEF). Established in 2025, CENDEF serves as OUM's think tank for exploring the issues and questions in open, distance, and digital education (ODDE) that will shape not only our institution's future, but also the broader landscape of higher education.

The appointment of five Global Fellows for the 2025-2026 cycle—Prof Extraordinaire Paul Prinsloo (University of South Africa), Prof Olaf Zawacki-Richter (Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg), Emeritus Prof Junhong Xiao (Open University of Shantou), Prof Insung Jung (Seoul National University), and Prof Melinda dela Peña Bandalaria (University of the Philippines Open University)—marked CENDEF's inaugural effort to convene a distinguished group of scholars to help OUM advance its mission of delivering critical, inclusive, and forward-looking digital education, while affirming our standing at the frontiers of ODDE.

This year, we are delighted to welcome five new Global Fellows for the 2026-2027 cycle: Prof Lim Cher Ping (The Education University of Hong Kong), Prof Felicitas Macgilchrist (Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg), Prof Bart Rienties (The Open University), Prof George Veletsianos (University of Minnesota-Twin Cities), and Prof Emeritus Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi (United Nations University). Like their predecessors, these scholars will contribute not only to OUM's development, but also to the wider communities in Malaysia and beyond.

Their expertise will be showcased during the 2nd Annual Public Lecture Series, to be held on 5 August

in Kuala Lumpur, where each Fellow will present a lecture under the theme “Beyond Standard Scripts: Imagining New Futures in Digital Education.”

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CENDEF is cultivating a vibrant community of scholars and practitioners who are prepared not only to respond to change, but also to shape it.

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The theme builds upon last year’s “Visionary Leadership: Charting the Futures of Digital Education.” If the inaugural series invited us to envision a future grounded in human values, this year’s conversations seek to imagine possibilities that extend beyond what is merely efficient, automated, and optimised, and towards digital futures that are equitable, creative, and deeply human.

Meanwhile, the inaugural Southeast Asian Fellowship brings together early- and mid-career academics from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines to examine how digitalisation is reshaping Southeast Asia and its futures. Under the theme “Sociodigital Futures of Southeast Asia,” the Fellows will produce immersive 3D storytelling works to be exhibited at REXPERIENCE Kuala Lumpur, alongside scholarly publications that deepen our collective understanding of the region’s digital landscape.

Through these initiatives, CENDEF is cultivating a vibrant community of scholars and practitioners who are prepared not only to respond to change, but also to shape it. By bringing together global and regional voices in ODDE, OUM aspires to strengthen our role as a leading hub for critical inquiry, meaningful collaboration, and strategic engagement.

The future of digital education is not something that simply unfolds before us; it is something we must create together. We hope you will be part of that journey as we continue writing OUM’s story, and, in doing so, help us create a brighter, more connected future for all.

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

Beyond Standard Scripts: Introducing the Fellows of the OUM-CENDEF Global Fellowship (2026-2027)



Photo by Razif Masri

The Global Fellowship is the flagship initiative of the Centre for Digital Education Futures (CENDEF) at Open University Malaysia (OUM). Each cycle, it convenes a small group of distinguished scholars whose work is shaping the future of open, distance, and digital education, bringing them into a year-long engagement with the University through research, public dialogue, and strategic exchange. By drawing leading international thinkers into sustained collaboration, the Fellowship advances OUM's mission of delivering critical, inclusive, and forward-looking digital education, and affirms its standing at the frontiers of the field.

Now in its second cycle (2026–27), the Fellowship brings together five Fellows. They are Prof Lim Cher Ping (The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR), Prof Felicitas Macgilchrist (Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany), Prof Bart Rienties (The Open University, United Kingdom), Prof George Veletsianos (University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, United States), and Prof Emeritus Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi (United Nations University, Japan). Between them they bring expertise across learning technologies and teacher development, the cultural politics of educational technology, learning analytics, digital learning environments, and education policy for sustainable development.

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What is lost when learning
is reduced to what can be
measured or predicted?

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This cycle takes as its theme “Beyond Standard Scripts: Imagining New Futures in Digital Education”. It is a rejoinder to the current discourse on digital education, which is shaped largely by narratives of efficiency, automation, and optimisation, framings driven by commercial imperatives and short-term thinking. The theme invites a different starting point. It asks whose values are encoded in the systems being built for education, what is lost when learning is reduced to what can be measured or predicted,

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and how educators, institutions, and communities might become active authors of digital education futures rather than passive recipients of systems designed elsewhere.

The Global Fellows will deliver public lectures at OUM's 2nd Annual Public Lecture Series (APLS) on 5 August 2026 at the Tun Dr Ismail Hall, World Trade Centre Kuala Lumpur. Each lecture takes up the theme from a distinct vantage point. Prof Yamaguchi asks higher education to confront the missing pieces in current AI narratives, Prof Veletsianos makes the case for a slower tempo in digital education, Prof Lim examines scale and localisation in teacher professional development, Prof Rienties argues for human-centred futures beyond intelligent automation, and Prof Macgilchrist traces rage, hope, and care as grounds for imagining new educational worlds.

Ahead of the APLS, two of the Fellows have contributed short essays introducing the concerns that animate their lectures. Their essays follow.

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Beyond Optimisation: Slowing Down the Future of Digital Education

By Prof George Veletsianos,
University of Minnesota–Twin Cities

Digital education is typically evaluated against three questions about teaching and learning:

- Is it effective – do students meet established learning goals?
- Is it engaging – does the environment draw sustained attention and positive response?
- Is it efficient – do students, educators, and institutions meet those goals with minimal expenditure of resources, like money and time?

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Photo by Razif Masri

These are reasonable and, to a certain degree, useful questions.

But they are optimisation questions. They ask how well and how cheaply a system delivers. They don't ask about unintended consequences or about anything beyond outcomes already defined in advance. The third question in particular treats time as a cost that must be minimised. From there, it is easy to assume that compressing time is worthwhile and necessary, leading to a variety of practices like instant grading, shorter courses, and compressed degrees.

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What becomes possible when we refuse to let optimisation define the horizons of digital education?

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While these practices might be appropriate in some contexts, they carry assumptions about teaching and learning that we tend to absorb without noticing them. In turn, those assumptions shape the ways we imagine the future of education. If efficiency is central, then education futures that don't prioritise it become difficult to imagine. Our imagination becomes constrained by the assumptions and priorities of those questions.

One orientation that might be helpful to consider in refusing efficiency is *Σιγά Σιγά* (siga siga), a Greek expression whose literal translation is “slowly slowly.” Its meaning is to invite people to slow down, to not rush, and to take their time. Such an orientation might be applied to digital technology in a number of ways, from declining to treat an edtech product's arrival as a reason to adopt it, to taking the time to ask what it does to relationships, judgement, and learning.

Siga siga invites us to ask a different question: What becomes possible when we refuse to let optimisation define the horizons of digital education?

inspired

Refusing the Premise: On Passive Recipients and Active Authors in Digital Education

By Prof Felicitas Macgilchrist,
Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg



Photo by Razif Masri

Education has become a global marketplace, with speculations that the edtech market will be worth USD 215 billion in 2026. In the face of this massive corporate investment, many people are seeking answers to how educators, students, institutions, and communities can become active authors of digital education futures, rather than passive recipients of systems designed elsewhere.

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Educators have long rejected software and hardware which contravenes their pedagogical principles.

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A key answer to this question is to refuse its premise. People are not passive recipients. There is a long history of refusal to use technologies in the ways they were designed. Research shows how classrooms are spaces of creative uptake and subversive use. Educators have long rejected software and hardware which contravenes their pedagogical principles. These actions have, however, been interpreted as a fear of technology: as old-fashioned pedagogies, lazy educators or stagnating institutions. A primary response has been to try to increase ‘technology acceptance’, rather than to redesign the sociotechnical systems.

It will, therefore, take intense work, firstly, to recognise the already active authorship of human actors. And secondly, for educators, students, institutions and communities to further empower themselves, demanding digital technologies and services which are (re-)designed to meet their needs, and rejecting tech fixes for trivial problems. This recognition and these demands will strengthen our active authorship of digital education futures.

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Sociodigital Futures in the Making:

Meet the Inaugural Fellows of OUM's Southeast Asia Fellowship

OUM's Southeast Asia Fellowship (SEAF) is a new initiative that brings together scholars, artists, technologists, and practitioners from across the region to examine how digitalisation is reshaping Southeast Asia and its futures. Developed by the Centre for Digital Education Futures (CENDEF), the Fellowship reflects OUM's commitment to understanding how digital technologies are altering social practices, cultural meaning, and institutions, and what this means for education and learning.

For the 2026–27 cycle, Fellows are taking up the theme of “Sociodigital Futures of Southeast Asia”. The term “sociodigital futures” refers to futures in the making that emerge through the dynamic interplay of social practices, cultures, institutions, and digital technologies. The underlying assumption, often overlooked but central here, is that technological change does not unfold in isolation. Technologies are shaped by the societies in which they are developed, adopted, adapted, and contested, even as they reshape those societies in return. This reshaping is often uneven.

This perspective carries particular weight at a time when artificial intelligence (AI), algorithmic systems, platforms, and data infrastructures are increasingly mediating how people communicate, work, govern, create, and learn. Questions about Southeast Asia's digital futures therefore cannot be reduced to questions of technological capability alone. They are also questions about values, power, culture, identity, and the kinds of societies that Southeast Asians wish to build.

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sociodigital futures’ refers to futures in the making that emerge through the dynamic interplay of social practices, cultures, institutions, and digital technologies.

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For OUM and CENDEF, such questions are closely connected to the future of digital education. Education does not exist apart from the wider social worlds in which it operates. The opportunities, challenges, assumptions, and inequalities that emerge through digitalisation inevitably shape educational systems, institutions, learners, and educators. OUM is itself situated within these conditions, serving learners across Malaysia and the wider region. Understanding digital education futures therefore requires attending to the sociodigital transformations taking shape across Southeast Asia. In engaging with these transformations, SEAF contributes to a fuller account of the contexts within which futures of education will be imagined, negotiated, and realised.

SEAF is also distinctive in how Fellows communicate their work. Alongside scholarly publications or equivalent outputs and public webinars, Fellows will collaborate with artists and technologists to produce 3D immersive storytelling experiences inspired by their projects. These works will be exhibited to public audiences, opening new avenues for engagement with the ideas and questions emerging from the Fellowship.

Underlying this is a simple recognition. Southeast Asia’s futures are not solely academic concerns. Such questions as technological change, cultural memory, heritage, and human flourishing are lived before they are theorised, and are often best grasped in forms that extend beyond scholarly texts. In weaving together research, public dialogue, and immersive storytelling, SEAF invites Fellows to find new ways of communicating complex ideas

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and drawing wider communities into conversations about the region's possible futures.

The inaugural SEAF cohort reflects the diversity and complexity of Southeast Asia itself. Their projects take up issues ranging from digital heritage and gender to urban mobility, disability, identity, and alternative ways of imagining the relationship between technology and society. Together, these projects illuminate how Southeast Asians are understanding, navigating, and shaping the many sociodigital futures emerging across the region.

To introduce the Fellows and their work, we invited each of them to reflect on a common question: "Why is it critical that Southeast Asia dives deep into research on the sociodigital futures of Southeast Asia?" Their responses follow.

Dr Myra Mentari Abubakar, International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS), Indonesia



The digital technologies shaping how Southeast Asians communicate, learn, remember the past, and imagine the future are mostly designed outside the region. They are built on data, assumptions, and priorities that often overlook Southeast Asian histories, languages, and social realities. As a result, these systems can simplify complex cultures, amplify some voices while ignoring others, and shape what stories become visible online.

This has real consequences. It affects, for instance, how generative AI portrays historical figures, what information appears in search results,

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and whose perspectives are prioritised on digital platforms. These technologies do not simply reflect society. They help shape public memory and influence how people understand themselves and their communities.

Southeast Asian scholars bring unique positionality, deep understanding of local contexts, and connections to the communities affected by these technologies. Therefore, studying our sociodigital futures is not only important for the production of knowledge but also for guaranteeing that digital futures are shaped by the people who will live with their consequences.

Dr Myra Mentari Abubakar is a cultural historian working on memory, gender, and postcolonial history in Southeast Asia. She holds a PhD from the Australian National University (2024) and is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at BRIN, Indonesia. Her SEAF project, *The Algorithmic Heroine: Gendered Memory and the Logic of Digital Platforms in Indonesia*, examines how AI and social media platforms distort the historical memory of Southeast Asian female revolutionaries.

Dr Roberto B. Figueroa Jr., Dr Shari Eunice T. San Pablo, and Blancaflor P. Arada, University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Philippines



Southeast Asia needs to look deeply into its sociodigital futures because they are already being shaped in the present by systems that many people do not design and cannot fully see. In Manila, for instance, app-based mobility platforms shape labour, time, and everyday survival in ways that

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affect workers and ordinary users, often invisibly.

What matters in sociodigital futures research is a refusal of the idea that the consequences of digital systems are neutral or inevitable. They are neither. In the context of platforms like these, creative research becomes a method for asking what kinds of mobility futures are possible, desirable, or unjust.

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Education does not exist apart
from the wider social worlds in
which it operates.

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Without regionally grounded research, shaping what comes next will be left to dominant corporate and technical actors whose models may reinforce unequal control over labour, data, and access. For this reason, such research helps Southeast Asia identify what is being lost, and what fairer alternatives can still be built. Southeast Asia must not simply inherit futures designed elsewhere but actively imagine and shape those grounded in its own histories, infrastructures, and everyday realities.

Led by Dr Shari Eunice T. San Pablo of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), this SEAF team integrates expertise across communication and immersive technologies. Dr Shari is an artist, educator, and Studio Director of Creative Systems & Futures Studio, and her work explores intersections of art, science, and human agency through interactive installations. Dr Roberto B. Figueroa Jr., Dean at UPOU and ISTaR Laboratory Head, researches extended reality and metaverse-enabled education while leading a DOST-funded immersive science communication project. Blancaflor P. Arada, Assistant Professor and UPOU Registrar, specialises in physical computing and educational innovations, focusing on Tinkercad and immersive space usability. The team's SEAF project, *Fare Play: Invisible Routes, Everyday Life, and Mobility Futures in Manila*, uses creative and immersive methods to trace how app-based mobility platforms are rewriting everyday life in the city.

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**Dr Ros Sayumphu, Cambodia University of
Science and Technology, Cambodia**



Southeast Asia is undergoing rapid digital transformation, and AI, data platforms, remote sensing, and immersive media are increasingly influencing governance, education, heritage, and public life. These technologies are not neutral. They shape how people understand history, identity, and community. Research on our sociodigital futures is therefore essential, allowing Southeast Asians to define how technology should serve our societies, cultures, and values rather than adapting to models developed elsewhere.

For Southeast Asia, where cultural diversity and historical complexity are defining strengths, research must examine not only technological innovation but also its ethical, social, and cultural consequences. Locally grounded scholarship can ensure, for instance, that digital transformation supports inclusion, protects cultural heritage, and respects community knowledge. By producing evidence-based perspectives rooted in regional experience, Southeast Asian researchers can contribute to global conversations while advancing digital futures that are equitable, culturally meaningful, and responsive to the needs of the communities they are intended to serve.

Dr Ros Sayumphu is an interdisciplinary researcher specialising in Science and Technology Studies (STS), digital heritage, and data ethics. His SEAF project, *When*

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Data Becomes Meaning: Digital Interpretation, Ethics, and Cultural Identity at Banteay Chhmar and Banteay Toap, examines how digital technologies shape cultural meaning, heritage interpretation, and community identity in Cambodia. Through an ethical and interdisciplinary lens, he investigates how digital innovation can strengthen culturally inclusive and sustainable sociodigital futures across Southeast Asia.

Dr Hazrul Hizam Karim, Christina Richard, and Dr P. Kangathevi Ponnudurai, Open University Malaysia, Malaysia



Across Southeast Asia, governments are investing heavily in digital transformation, viewing technology as central to the region's future. Countries are competing to strengthen digital economies, modernise education, and position themselves for an increasingly technology-driven world.

Amid this race towards innovation, it is easy to overlook the possibility that not everyone will experience this future in the same way. We were reminded of this during a conversation with a visually impaired learner. She spoke about continuing her education despite knowing that her eyesight would continue to deteriorate. The uncertainty was not whether she wanted to learn or participate, but whether the systems, technologies, and institutions surrounding her would evolve in ways that allowed her to do so.

Her situation raises a broader question. Who gets to participate in imagining these futures in the first place? Learners themselves, including those

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whose needs are often less visible, should have opportunities not only to use future digital education systems, but also to help shape them. Southeast Asia will undoubtedly continue to flourish digitally. The more important question is whether everyone will have an opportunity to flourish alongside it. Innovation without inclusion is simply a more efficient form of exclusion.

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SEAF invites Fellows to find new ways of communicating complex ideas and drawing wider communities into conversations about the region's possible futures.

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Christina Richard is a media scholar and former producer researching digital citizenship, cyberbullying, and online participation. Dr Hazrul Hizam Karim is a counsellor and researcher specialising in psychology, wellbeing, and human behaviour. Dr P. Kangathevi Ponnudorai is an English Language Studies scholar whose work spans technology-enhanced learning, forensic linguistics, and language accessibility. Together, their SEAF project, *Built With/out Us: Visually Impaired Youth Reimagine Inclusive Futures*, investigates how visually impaired learners navigate digital education and envision more inclusive futures.

Dr Nitipat Pholchai (Ong), Chiang Mai University, Thailand



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Southeast Asia is among the world's heaviest consumers of digital technology, yet almost none of the platforms, algorithms, or AI systems shaping our daily lives were designed here, for us, or with our cosmologies in mind. The imbalance is structural rather than incidental. The companies producing these technologies extract our attention, our data, and our relational life as raw material.

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The inaugural SEAF cohort reflects the diversity and complexity of Southeast Asia itself.

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Our modern bodies arrive fragmented as a consequence. Compressed by the accelerated speed of urban digital life, we have learned to move faster than we can feel. Research into our own sociodigital futures is therefore an act of reclaiming *Khwan*, the soul that scatters under extraction and must be called back collectively. Digital literacy cannot mean only the ability to function within platforms built elsewhere. What we need are participatory, embodied methodologies rooted in local cosmologies and collective practice. In my work, quantum computing enters into dialogue with *Khwan* ontology, an animistic framework of relational personhood, tested across three local communities exchanging learning about collective wellness and spiritual resilience in relation to AI society.

The stakes are not academic. They are about who gets to imagine the future, and from whose body we begin.

Dr Nitipat Pholchai (Ong) works at the edges where bodies, cosmologies, and quantum AI systems meet. Based in Chiang Mai, he is a movement artist, researcher, and educator whose practice asks what becomes possible when indigenous soul-essence ontology and quantum computing listen to each other. He is the founder of Conscious Movement Collective Bangkok and the Khwantum Project, an ongoing inquiry into entanglement, presence, and the futures we might sense into being together. His SEAF project is *Beyond the Quantum Divide: Khwan-tum Futures: Khwan Cosmology as a Vernacular Framework for Southeast Asian Sociodigital Futures*.

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Standing Inside the Question: Translating Research into Immersive Form

Sebastien Jurkowski is Principal of Contrast Studio and Curatorial Advisor at Rexperience KL, and is working with the inaugural cohort of OUM's Southeast Asian Fellowship (SEAF) on its immersive content. Over the coming year he will lead, as creative director, the translation of five research projects into ten-minute immersive works, to be premiered at REXKL in December 2026. Here he reflects on what that translation asks of a practitioner, and on why the exhibition space is not an afterthought to the scholarship but a second way of putting the same question.

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When Dr Myra Mentari Abubakar sent through her SEAF proposal, one image stayed with me: the 1905 Van Vuren arrest photograph of Cut Nyak Din, the Acehnese revolutionary. Dr Myra's work asks what happens to that photograph now, when it is passed through generative AI, search engines, and social media, and how the woman in the frame is flattened, orientalised, or quietly erased by systems that were never taught to see her.

To read that argument in a journal is one thing. To stand inside it is another kind of understanding entirely, to watch her image morph in real time as successive algorithmic filters lay hold of it, to feel yourself implicated in the spectatorship that produces those distortions.

That gap, between reading about something and standing inside it, is what SEAF's immersive component is for. It is not decoration. It is a different mode of address. Southeast Asia's futures are being shaped, right now, by teenagers scrolling on the LRT, the side-hustlers navigating traffic on Grab bikes, or your uncle livestreaming his durian sales from his living room. They are not going to open a scholarly article. But they will spend ten minutes inside a walk-in room in Kuala Lumpur, and they will leave carrying a question they did not bring in.

At Rexperience and Contrast Studio, we come into this from the practitioner side, from colour, sound, projection, the design of a space that surrounds the viewer. What SEAF has asked us to do is harder than the commercial commissions we are used to. Dr Nitipat Pholchai's Khwan cosmology has to remain Khwan cosmology when it meets our particle systems. Dr Ros Sayumphu's LiDAR of Banteay Chhmar has to hold the ethical weight of a heritage community, not just its point cloud. Dr Shari Eunice T. San Pablo and her team's work on platform mobility has to make invisible routes visible without deciding for the visitor which mobility futures should prevail. The work by Christina Mary Richard and her team demands that we recreate on screen the varied ways in which visually impaired persons "see," asking the sighted visitor to spend ten minutes inside a perception that is not their own. The discipline is not to translate the research into something prettier. It is to make the research legible to people who would not otherwise encounter it, without losing what made it worth doing in the first place.

If we get that right, five ten-minute pieces in a Kuala Lumpur exhibition space will do something a journal issue cannot quite do on its own. They will draw the region's next generation into the conversation about the sociodigital futures being built around them, in a form they already speak. **inspired**

POST

Towards an Embedded Systems Approach to Transforming ODDE in a Post-Digital Age: The Case of OUM

By Emeritus Prof Junhong Xiao,
Shantou Open University

Fundamentally speaking, the use of technology in education is to enhance educational quality, and in the case of open and distance education (ODE) institutions, primarily to assure quality and broader access, leading to new models of learning and teaching. As more and more sophisticated and powerful digital technology is integrated into the world we inhabit, digital technology is now taken to be a holy grail by ODE institutions that are keen to digitally transform their institutional operations in hopes of enhancing and assuring quality as well as maintaining competitive advantage in widening access.

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In “Digital Transformation Signals: Is Your Institution on the Journey?”, EDUCAUSE defines digital transformation as “a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution’s business model, strategic directions, and value proposition.” Therefore, it is self-evident that simply using technology in education, no matter how cutting-edge it is, does not lead to digital transformation, as is best exemplified by traditional dedicated ODE institutions.

Ever since their establishment, ODE institutions have distinguished themselves from conventional higher education (HE) institutions not merely by their technology-enhanced means of delivery. They are distinct in many other aspects, including “business model, strategic directions, and value proposition”, among other things. An explicit message from the history of ODE institutions is that the transformation of an education system involves a systemic change whereby change in an element is experienced by the whole system, most probably catalysing reactions in other elements. This systems approach to ODE was first adopted by Charles Wedemeyer in his Articulated Instructional Media project in America in the 1960s. It was later further developed and elaborated by Michael G. Moore in his distance education theory. The systems theory informed the foundation of the Open University in the UK (OUUK) and subsequently the establishment of other open universities around the world.

This is a lesson that should be valued but unfortunately tends to be neglected today, not only by conventional HE institutions seeking to take advantage of digital technology but also by ODE institutions themselves. Reviews of research in ODE including educational technology have repeatedly indicated that the field is characterised by one-off, short-duration, isolated studies. Given that digital transformation implicates systemic change, a systems approach to ODE research and practice is essential to ensuring the generation of meaningful research results and the productive application of these results to practice. This argument is echoed by Professor Mike Sharples at the OUUK. He made a case for a systems approach to AI in education in his 2025 paper “A Systems Approach to AI and

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Education in a Post-Digital World”.

“Taking a piecemeal approach in adapting to an AI-infused future (for example, regulating how students must use AI in their assignments, or attempting to reduce staff workload by introducing AI into the administration process) is unlikely to be successful. Education is a strongly interconnected system, with many mutually dependent components, including recruitment, registration, teaching, student support, assessment, careers, and administration,” says Sharples.

Drawing upon the Russian-born American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, Mike Sharples proposed a systems approach to AI and education in a post-digital world, an approach that is intended to show the various layers of interaction centred on a student in formal education. According to the embedded systems approach, the student is situated in four layers of systems. The innermost is the microsystem (e.g., class, materials and exams) which is surrounded by the mesosystem (e.g., library, calendar, student community, labs, and meeting rooms), the macrosystem (e.g., admissions, student services, procurement, quality assurance, IT support, career advice, and staff training), and the exosystem (e.g., internships, social media, technology companies, government regulations, educational technology vendors, careers, and education providers). These four systems are concentric. According to Mike Sharples, “[e]ach layer interacts with and depends on others, so changing one component affects the entire system.” For example, adopting a new technology “will impact IT support, staff training and workload, procurement, design of teaching materials, exams, quality assurance, and so on.”

Mike Sharples then listed ten agendas with respective key actions for education institutions of all types (see Table 1). He argues that education institutions must adopt an embedded systems approach to educational innovation in order to survive and prosper in an AI-infused world.

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1	Build awareness and leadership support	• Educate leaders • Develop champions
2	Map the institution as a system	• Understand interconnections • Engage stakeholders
3	Define innovation goals	• Clarify objectives • Align with mission
4	Identify leverage points	• Spot opportunities • Prioritise initiatives
5	Foster collaborative cultures	• Break down silos • Encourage open dialogue
6	Develop iterative processes	• Experiment and pilot • Collect feedback
7	Build systems thinking capacity	• Train staff and faculty • Leverage external expertise
8	Use data for decision-making	• Monitor metrics • Analyse trends
9	Institutionalise systems thinking	• Embed in policy • Integrate into curricula
10	Commit to continuous learning	• Evaluate progress • Learn from others

Table 1: The agendas and key actions of a systems approach to AI and education

OUM's Teaching & Learning Ecosystem, also known as evolved ODDE model (see Figure 1), and its Strategic Research Alliances (SRAs) initiative are highly aligned with systems thinking, in particular the embedded systems approach proposed by Sharples. With forty years' experience as a practitioner and researcher in ODDE, I find OUM's evolved ODDE model to be a particularly thoughtful and well-conceived framework. I first learnt about this model from Dr David Lim's interview with Professor Datuk Dr Tajudin Md Ninggal, OUM Vice President (Academic & Research) (see *inspired*, issue 24). This evolved ODDE model is informed by proven theories of pedagogy, psychology, and instructional design with the aim of prioritising and meeting individual needs to optimise learning outcomes. Educators and students are at the centre of the model. It bears testimony to OUM's philosophy of digital humanism.

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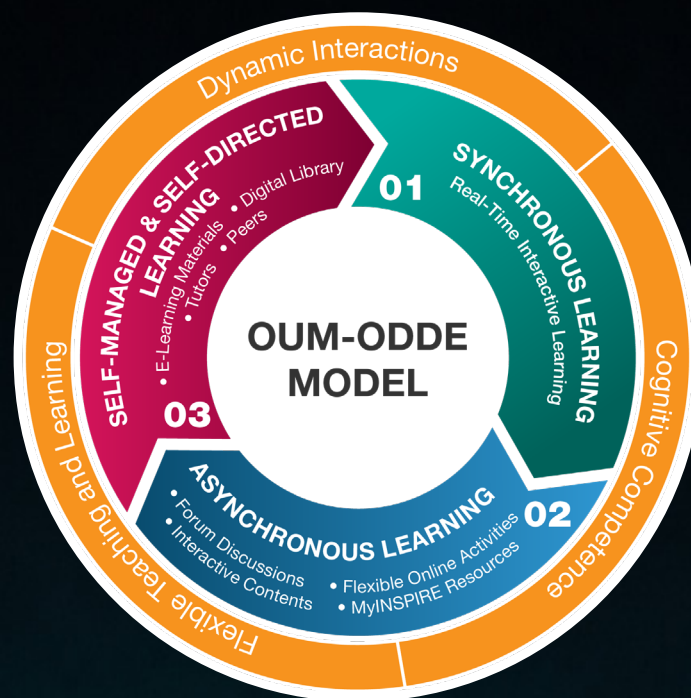


Figure 1: OUM's evolved ODDE model

The OUM model is composed of two rings. In the inner ring, learning is facilitated in three modes: synchronous (e.g., real-time interactive learning), asynchronous (e.g., forum discussion, flexible online activities, interactive content, and myINSPIRE platform resources), as well as self-managed and self-directed (e.g., E-Learning materials, digital library, tutors, and peers). In the outer ring, dynamic interaction, cognitive competence, and flexible teaching and learning interact to ensure that the three learning modes in the inner ring will reinforce one another to produce the optimal learning outcomes. Obviously, there is unequivocal evidence of systems thinking embodied in the OUM model. And similar to Mike Sharples's systems approach to education, it is student-centred.

In early 2024, OUM launched its SRAs, a flagship research initiative. The initiative emerged from a retreat held in early December 2023, where 30 active academics came together to shape the future direction of research at OUM. It is organised around macro-, meso-, and micro-level issues that reflect OUM's institutional priorities as well as emerging research themes in the broader ODDE landscape. The SRAs represent OUM's concerted investment in research, focusing on key challenges to be addressed through scholarly

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inquiry. Addressing these challenges is expected to contribute to OUM's long-term sustainability and continued development.

More specifically, the four major strands of research, namely Technology Integration and Innovation, Inclusive Education and Business Sustainability, Quality Education, and Psychological and Spiritual Wellbeing and Environmental Sustainability, aim to bridge the digital divide, foster equity and resilience, enhance learning outcomes, and build holistic and sustainable futures respectively. Each alliance has five sub-research groups tasked with exploring specific subthemes. These alliances encourage collaboration across faculties and disciplines, making them interdisciplinary by nature, and all academics are expected to participate in at least one sub-research group. "By bringing together diverse stakeholders – academic teams, industry leaders, and global partners – and providing multifaceted support, the SRAs aim to foster synergies that address pressing real-world challenges," says Prof Tajudin.

If we map OUM's ODDE model and SRAs against Table 1, we can easily see that OUM is taking an embedded systems approach to building a digital university for all. There is ample evidence that OUM has done well in at least six aspects, namely building awareness and leadership support, mapping the institution as a system, defining innovation goals, identifying leverage points, fostering collaborative cultures, and committing to continuous learning. There is no doubt that with the implementation of SRAs, there will be progress in developing iterative processes, building systems thinking capacity, using data for decision-making, and institutionalizing systems thinking.

We can argue convincingly that OUM is advancing in the right direction towards the kind of digital transformation that aligns with both the general and institution-specific missions and goals of ODDE. Both top-down and bottom-up efforts are effectively mobilised to ensure the successful delivery of predefined goals, with notable achievements already made in numerous areas. To the best of my knowledge, OUM is among the few, if not the only one, that adopts a systems approach, with practice and research informing and reinforcing each other, in pursuing its ambition to be a leader

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in the national, regional, and international ODDE communities.

A word of caution might be necessary, though, for those ODDE institutions that appear to be (over)optimistic about the role of technology per se in driving transformation and tend to underestimate possible obstacles ahead. For example, while endorsement from senior management and buy-in from the grassroots are essential, equally imperative are, inter alia, institutional and individual stakeholders' expertise in implementing innovations, fit-for-purpose infrastructure, and substantial institutional commitment. These are lessons learnt from the OUUK's recent high-profile project: the design, development, deployment, and evaluation of an in-house Artificial Intelligence Digital Assistant (AIDA). A paper published in May 2026 presents an overview of this two-year longitudinal research. Authored by Professor Bart Rienties and three other OUUK researchers, "New systems of learning for distance learning institutions? A six-study review of implementing AIDA" is worthwhile reading for colleagues engaged in ODDE transformation in the post-digital age. **inspired**

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Responding to AI, or Avoiding the Quicksand

By Professor Extraordinaire Paul Prinsloo
Visiting Senior Fellow, OUM

The urgency trap and AI as quicksand

It is the stuff of nightmares. You dream that you are trapped in quicksand, and the more you struggle, the deeper you sink. In many adventure films, sinking deeper does not end well. Yet if we can believe the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, death by quicksand is all but unheard of.

Since the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, there has been an urgency in the air.

Many institutions, managers and educators feel that they are being pulled under by the dramatic reconfiguration of “knowledge”, “learning”, “assessment” and “teaching”. The continuous and intentional bombardment of updates and newer, faster models, together with the fear of being left behind, resembles for many the experience of being trapped in quicksand, where resistance is futile.

Navigating the quicksand

Institutions and individuals navigate artificial intelligence (AI) as quicksand differently. At one end of the spectrum stand sceptics and critical scholars who raise concerns about intellectual property rights, cognitive offloading, the deskilling of students, and ethical questions of privacy and the commercialisation of online spaces. At the other end are those who embrace AI as team member and research partner, who use it to develop curricula and assessment, mark assignments, run analyses and co-author scientific papers. Somewhere in the middle sits a

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Institutions and individuals
navigate AI as quicksand
differently.

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group of educators and students who share some of these concerns but accept that AI is here to stay, and who judge it better to find critical and ethical ways of engaging with it, to develop local AI systems and models, and to build regulatory frameworks and structures that hold AI to account.

Re-assessing the quicksand

Globally, protests are mounting against the proliferation of data centres and their immense environmental impact, and against companies such as Palantir and Anthropic for their involvement in surveillance, military campaigns, genocide and automated warfare. Emerging evidence shows that many companies which initially cut jobs in favour of AI have since *re-appointed* the employees they dismissed. Research by the National Bureau of Economic Research, reported in the *Harvard Business Review* (1 July 2026), likewise finds no measurable improvement in productivity attributable to AI over the past three years. There is alarm that the first “AI-native” appointees bring alarmingly shallow ideas and little capacity for independent and critical thought. There is growing consensus, too, that the generation of falsehoods is inherent in the character of large language models, that more training data does *not* resolve them, and that generative AI cannot deliver on its own what was first promised, although combinations of different types of AI, such as generative AI paired with neuro-symbolic AI, may hold more promise.

That change is in the air, and that a great deal of hype circulates within it, is true. No one would disagree that large language models have disrupted research, the validation of knowledge claims, teaching, assessment and learning. What we have reason to question is whether the urgency, and the narrative of AI as quicksand, is necessarily valid or helpful.

If not quicksand, then what?

In the Minority World, or Global North, there are signs of national governments responding with regulation and legislation, holding big AI companies to account and moving away from American Big Tech. France is migrating from Microsoft to Linux, and the European Parliament from Google to the French alternative Qwant. In Germany, the state of Schleswig-Holstein has replaced most of its Microsoft-powered systems with open-source alternatives, cancelling

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The real competitive advantage of AI does not lie in speed but in careful, purpose-driven integration.

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nearly seventy per cent of its licences. Norway has banned generative AI from elementary schools and requires teacher supervision of its use by children between fourteen and sixteen. A growing number of countries are restricting access to social media for children under sixteen.

In the Global South, or Majority World, AI as quicksand plays out differently. There is at present little evidence of restrictions of the kind found in Norway. American Big Tech, moreover, offers “deals” to countries in the Global South in exchange for minerals, data or favourable economic conditions. Starlink extends access to digital networks amid concerns that such access erodes sovereignty and outsources the digital futures of nations to private organisations headquartered in the Global North. The investments of Microsoft, Google and others are read as votes of confidence, but they come at great cost to citizen privacy and digital sovereignty, and risk colonisation by the Empire of AI.

There is, however, emerging resistance in the Global South, not only against American Big Tech but against the urgency itself and the fear of missing out. India has launched a hackathon inviting startups, researchers, students and institutions to develop affordable, local, open-source models that answer the need for multilingual AI, and the UN-backed Africa AI hub supports the growth of local AI ecosystems.

Purpose-driven integration as antidote to the urgency trap

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article (1 July 2026), David De Cremer warns against the “urgency trap”, in which “leaders over-prioritize problems that are easy to see and measure while neglecting deeper, longer-term issues that are harder to diagnose”. The “real competitive advantage of AI does not lie in speed”, he argues, but in careful, “purpose-driven integration”. Successful integration does not begin with AI, or with the intentional narratives that stoke the fear of losing out or being left behind, but with an understanding of *why the organisation exists* and *what kind of value* it wants to create for its staff, its stakeholders and the broader society.

The current AI moment presents itself as quicksand which, if we believe the hype, will swallow us unless we respond as fast as possible. The irony is that in our haste we sink deeper than before, in sand that may not be quicksand at all. **inspired**