

A Comparative Study of the Administrative Styles, Educational Processes, and Outcomes of Selected Asian Open Universities

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Abstract

This paper reports on the purpose, procedure and general results of a comparative study conducted by the Centre for Research in Distance and Adult Learning (CRIDAL) at the Open University of Hong Kong concerning the open and distance learning institutes in Asia. Three major research questions explored in this study are: (1) how do Asian open and distance universities differ from each other and from their counterparts in other regions of the world? (2) what best practices in instructional design, use of information and communication technology (ICT), considerations for cultural and political factors, especially language, can be learned from the open and distance universities? (3) what differing outcomes are apparent, and what is responsible for those differences? The methods of electronic forum and subsequent questionnaire survey, main questionnaire survey and face-to-face interview are employed in a four-stage procedure to collect data for the study. All the open and distance universities in Asia formed the sample of this research. A total of six universities have been selected as case studies using a stratified simple sampling technique. Using each university as a unit of data collection, some officials and academic staff in the selected open universities in Asia will be interviewed. NU.DIST and SPSS are employed for qualitative and quantitative analysis respectively. The paper reports the general results of the first three stages.

Introduction

Contemporary developments indicate that Asia now has the largest number of students using the open and distance learning mode of education compared with other regions of the world. Five of the ten mega-universities, i.e., those with over 100,000 enrolments, as identified by Daniel (1995) are in the Asian region - – those of China, India, Indonesia, Korea and Thailand. In China the number of enrolled students in 44 radio and television universities reaches 690,000 (China Central Radio and Television University, 1999). The phenomenal growth in the number of open and distance learners in Asia in recent years has created significant opportunities and concerns in the region. The continuing market demand for open and distance learning to reach the greater majority of those who would not have received their education through the conventional means presents situations which demand cost effective planning and implementation (McNay, 1987) appropriate staffing and operational management, and well designed teaching and support materials. The mounting of new courses, enrolling new groups of students and using new approaches to open and distance learning has created an enormous need to understand on a comparative basis the administrative styles, educational processes and the outcomes of several aspects of this mode of teaching and learning. However, research results currently available within the Asian region are evaluative, valuable to the particular institution, but of limited worth to others. While such research should naturally continue, it needs to be

balanced with more meta-analysis and comparative studies. How, for example, do Asian open and distance universities differ from each other and from their counterparts in other regions of the world? What differing outcomes are apparent, and what is responsible for those differences? What best practice by way of instructional design, the use of information and communication technology, the considerations for cultural and political factors can be learned from the open and distance universities? All these should give a general direction for the future management of open and distance universities in Asia, provide growth and influence in the practice of open and distance learning worldwide and should inform and affect the practice of open and distance education in the region. The purpose of this study is to explore the administrative styles, educational processes and outcomes of selected Asian open and distance universities from a comparative perspective.

Procedure

A four-stage procedure has been adopted in the data collection process as follows:

1st Stage - An electronic forum was conducted from 10 August to 14 October 1998 covering the following three themes: (1) administrative styles, (2) educational processes and (3) educational outcomes. Prof. Raj Dhanarajan, Prof. Jenny Johnson and Dr. Gordon Burt were invited as keynote speakers to initiate the discussion in each section. Open and distance educators from all parts of the world were invited to participate in the forum.

2nd Stage – Although the electronic forum attracted a broad range of subscribers in the study. It was found that the majority of the participants were from non-Asian countries. For example, academic staff in open and distance universities in Mainland China account for more than 50 percent of the total open and distance educators in Asia. However, due to the problems of language and access to computers there were only 2 participants from Mainland China and they didn't express their opinions at all. In order to seek the views and opinions of the open and distance education researchers and practitioners in Asia, questionnaires in both English and Chinese versions were designed and sent to Asian open and distance educators who have not participated in the electronic forum discussion.

3rd Stage - The research team developed an instrument for data collection from senior officials and academic staff in a large number of Asian open and distance learning institutions.

4th Stage - Research team members will conduct on-site interviews with key personnel and general academic staff from selected open and distance universities in Asia to further explore the critical issues raised in the first three stages.

The first two stages have already been satisfactorily completed. More data analysis in the third stage and the preparation of the fourth stage are still in progress. The paper will report the procedure and general results of the first two stages and the part of the third.

Samples

1st Stage - Electronic forum

An electronic discussion group was established and open/distance educators from all parts of the world were invited to participate. One hundred and two subscribers from 15 countries have taken part in this electronic forum. Amongst them, there are 20 from Australia, 23 from Hong Kong, 15 from the United States, 7 from the United Kingdom, 6 from Canada, 3 from the Philippines, 3 from Mainland China, 1 from Italy, 1 from Finland, 1 from New Zealand, 1 from Singapore, 1 from Mongolia, 1 from Germany, 1 from India, 1 from Malaysia, 1 from South Africa. Besides, there are 6 from various business enterprises, 5 from other types of organisations and 4 from the computer network.

2nd Stage - First questionnaire survey

After the electronic forum, questionnaires in both English and Chinese versions were designed and sent to 69 open and distance universities in Asia. Forty-three representatives from 33 open and distance universities have completed the questionnaires and the returned percentage was 47.82%. All data were translated into English and summarised.

3rd Stage - Main questionnaire survey

Based on the results of the electronic forum and the first questionnaire survey, two different questionnaires in both English and Chinese versions were designed for the main study. One was for the senior officials and the another for the general academic staff in Asian open and distance education institutions. The questionnaires were sent to 482 participants who attended the following international conferences: 1997 & 1998 Annual Conferences of AAOU, 1998 Shanghai International Open and Distance Education Symposium and 1999 Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Brunei Darussalam.

One hundred twenty-five completed questionnaires from senior officials were received and the returned percentage is 58.1%, including 1 from Bangladesh, 1 from Hong Kong, 6 from India, 1 from Iran, 97 from China, 1 from Malaysia, 13 from the Philippines, 2 from Sri Lanka and 3 from Thailand. One hundred and three completed questionnaires were received from the general academic staff and the returned percentage was 44.2%, including 1 from Bangladesh, 6 from Hong Kong, 6 from India, 3 from Indonesia, 1 from Iran, 1 from Japan, 74 from China, 4 from Malaysia, 1 from Pakistan, 2 from the Philippines, 1 from Sri Lanka and 3 from Thailand.

Data analysis

NU.DIST is employed for qualitative data analysis and SPSS is used for quantitative data analysis.

Results

General results from the electronic forum discussion

There was a consensus that open and distance learning institutions should be learner-centred organizations, which should provide an open environment, where people should, as much as possible, be empowered to develop as well as to achieve their aspirations. National culture would be an influential factor in building closer inter-institutional

collaboration across borders. Organizational culture would also play a key role in shaping institutional efficiency and effectiveness. The level and amount of government funding would be a key issue influencing decision-making processes at various levels, as well as administrative styles of educational institutions. The availability and applicability of information and communication technology (ICT) would also affect the structuring of an institution, the flow and speed of information dissemination as well as the mode of delivery and communication.

The purpose of open and distance education should not only to produce highly informed or highly skilled persons but also to develop high level independent thoughts and problem solving abilities. The four pillars in education could be helpful for us to explore it: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together. However, the contents and methods of teaching should be based on local as well as national contexts. Open and distance learning courses should be delivered and supported through different media, such as online web, voice mail, instructional television, interactive television network, face-to-face meeting and correspondence. ICT would help to increase accessibility and convenience to our students. But the merits of printed materials, and the cost in implementing IT could not be overlooked.

The outcomes of open and distance learning should be evaluated by different ways in different institutions; such as the cost-effectiveness, retention rates, passing rates, use of new technology, curriculum specialism and students assessment. However, the values and process should be important when evaluating outcomes. The similarities and differences between open/distance learning institutions and traditional institutions were also raised. Viewpoints, which applied the notion of 'systematic investigation of the worth or merit of an object' and the six key issues of 'ethics', 'coverage', 'costs', 'objectives', 'effects', and 'stakeholders' needed to be explored.

After the electronic forum discussion, many more questions have emerged while some questions have answers. The first stage generated a list of the questions as follow: how do issues of funding and financing influence administrative styles and decision-making processes in institutions? what roles do ICT play in administration as well as teaching and learning? how do(es) the style/styles of administration (at departmental and institutional levels) affect the teaching and learning processes? What are the rationales of open and distance universities? what are important issues in educational processes? what types of media are integrated into the teaching and learning processes? what is the importance of including computer-mediated communication into learning? how much can students access on-line databases and information banks? what should be included when measuring outcomes of distance and open education, and how do outcomes affect the people in distance and open education? All these questions need to be explored in a comparative way based on local context.

Main result from the two questionnaire surveys

From the results of the two questionnaire surveys it was found that the majority of the open and distance educators concerned over insufficient government support in financing open and distance education in Asia. Apart from China, India and Japan, most Asian governments allocate a minimal amount of recurrent funding to open and distance universities. These universities have to draw a high proportion of their income from student fees and donations. Funding for open and distance learning has to compete with other public priorities and in institutions have to keep down expenditure on student support. It, in turn, affects the quality of teaching and learning as well as the successful completion rates.

The respondents from Mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan and Philippines, perceive the administrative styles in their open and distance learning institutions as "bureaucratic and directive", while the respondents from Thailand regard it in their open and distance universities as "managerial".

The results show that the importance of ICT have been recognised by open and distance learning institutions in Asia. However, ICT has not been widely used in the learning process in most of open and distance universities. In the majority of Asian countries the printed materials and television broadcast are the most common media in open and distance education. However, the teleconferencing technology has been employed in a few countries, such as India and Philippines. In addition many open and distance universities still use face-to-face lectures while the others use tutorials. Some open and distance universities have established online courses and many prepare to set up web-based courses.

In Asian open and distance universities the decisions concerning distance teaching programmes are made by faculties/departments and then approved by the university management. The decision-making process is not interfered by the government. Under certain circumstances, market surveys also play a part in determining course development. In course design different institutions involve different people, including course authors, course team and student representatives. Some institutions have standard media formula for all courses.

The majority of Asian open and distance universities mainly use their mother tongue as a language of instruction while India and Philippines use English in teaching and learning. The majority of respondents thought that the instruction of language and cultural were very important issues in educational processes.

From the main survey, 20 outcome indicators were identified and were divided into four parts: (1) teaching, (2) research, (3) consultancy projects and related activities, (4) cultural and social outputs. Based on the assessment by 447 respondents, it was found that the cultural and social outputs was ranked as the most important. Teaching and research, considered to be equally important, are both ranked the second. Only about half of the respondents think that consultancy projects and related activities is an important indicator of educational outcome. However, different open and distance universities have different outcome indicators based on local situation.

Discussion

The basic philosophy of open and distance learning is to provide a flexible second

chance' for study to adults learners who, for whatever reasons, have been denied this opportunity. Open and distance education should provide an open and learner-centred environment. Although these rationales have been widely accepted in western countries, they are not widely adopted in practice in many of Asian open and distance universities. For example, some countries have the enrollment exams in selecting new students while others have free entrance. Why open assess system could not be adopted in some Asian distance universities need to be further examined based on local context. In addition, many open and distance universities still use lectures in teaching and learning. It seems that that teacher-centred distance education is still the prevalent idea in many of the open distance institutions in Asia. Tam (1997, p.10) has stated that, "Regrettably,..., East Asian distance education is rather slow in making the transition from distance teaching to distance learning. If care were not taken the world would have made another significant leap toward virtual learning while we still continue to struggle with distance teaching using first generation instructional and communication technologies. The time has come to modernise very drastically our concept and practice of open and distance education to yield even greater dividends than we currently have". It is important topic to explore the difficulties for these open and distance universities in transferring from distance teaching to distance learning.

Open and distance learning plays an important role in meeting the demands of lifelong learning as well as human resource developing. However, it has shown the conventional universities have received huge financial support from the government whilst the open and distance learning ones have very limited, if any, assistance from the government in terms of funding. In view of this, open and distance educators have called for a reassessment of the social, economic and cultural contributions of open/distance education under the new paradigm of lifelong education. About the administrative styles the majority of open and distance universities in Asia adopt "bureaucratic and directive" types. However, it is questionable about whether or not this conventional style is suitable for open and distance education and could meet future challenges.

From the survey findings, it appears that ICT resources have not been widely utilised in many of the Asian regions. Some educators (Kirkwood, 1997) have predicted that in the following decades, ICT is going to play an increasingly important role. The technology will become an economical means for sustainable educational development. The challenges facing educational policy makers will include for example how to utilise network technology to better serve students. The acquisition and application of information and communication technology are going to have a large impact on the open and distance learning. As pointed out by Tam (1999), the emerging paradigm will be one which emphasises flexible interactive student-centred learning and virtual learning environment. Therefore open and distance universities in Asia should keep abreast of the new development in modern information and communication technology in order to maintain its competitive edge against their counterparts in other countries, and fully utilise the advantage of resources sharing in this information era.

Moreover, while the rapid development of modern ICT makes the dream of global education a reality, the issue on local culture and language becomes a central topic in open and distance education. It has been found from this study that culture and language were regarded as a very important topic in educational processes of open and distance

education. Dhanarajan (1997) stated that there was a fear that globalisation was bringing about the domination of knowledge by a few countries/actors and their power. These actually replace the traditional ways of internationalising knowledge systems. According to Carr (Zhang, 1999, p.30), 'the development of global education is made possible by the advances in modern information technology, however, this may result in a cultural imperialism' in which education programmes on the communication highways are out of place in the cultural and linguistic contexts to which they are explored". Carr pointed out that global knowledge should be absorbed with the consideration of indigenous needs.

The measurement of outcomes in the design and delivery of effective distance education programmes are of paramount importance in the attempt to understand the through put and end product. Various parameters and metrics have been developed and adopted to measure the performance of the open and distance learning institutions. The findings from the main survey revealed that the cultural and social outputs were regarded as the most important indicators. As the same results in the theme on educational processes, localisation was extremely emphasised in evaluating an open and distance university. It is interesting to explore about how different open universities in Asia design their own indicators based on local context.

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