Introduction
A useful definition of 'nexus' is - 'an important connection between the parts of a system or a group of things' (Cambridge International English Dictionary, 2000). The paper examines the boundaries to the research and policy parts of the system affecting ODL and connections between them; what affects the strength of the links; and the various levels of the system.

There are two meanings associated with the connection between the words 'research' and 'policy' in ODL. The first is - ODL research policy - that is policy for promoting, funding and directing research in ODL. Secondly there is - ODL policy research - that is research on ODL policy, for example, studying the effects of open entry policy, how and by whom the curriculum is determined, which target groups selected, what media are used, and assessment procedures adopted.

ODL researchers will look to ODL research policy and bodies responsible for policy for ways of getting support for their research. ODL policy researchers will look at policies and bodies responsible for formulating and implementing ODL policies to examine, analyse and assess the impact and success of policies.

The link between research and policy is not symmetrical, the connection from research to policy is one aspect; and from policy to research is another. Also there are more specific considerations regarding the links to and from research policy and policy research.

The strength of the links is a function of other factors that in combination determine both what research is undertaken and policies adopted. Furthermore these considerations apply at many levels from global and international, national, institutional, departmental, to individuals and there are interactions between levels.

The next section considers the terms - research, policy, research policy and policy research - in general and applied to ODL before examining the links. Later sections will examine the strength of links, levels of policy and research, and draw conclusions.

Terms and links
Research
Research is a vast and expanding endeavour covering all disciplines - physical and social sciences, humanities, education etc. ODL research is an specialist and relatively small area. There are issues of whether ODL is a discipline, whether its research has distinct boundaries, and what are the significant overlaps and connection with other disciplines eg. educational technology, adult education, cognitive science (see Journal of Distance Education, 1989). This particularly concerns the maintenance and use of
research databases, what is included and their evolving structure (eg. ICDL, http://icdl.open.ac.uk).

ODL research includes a range of research areas, for example Holmberg's 1996 list includes the following areas - theory, target groups and student bodies, the environmental context, course development, interaction, students' learning, organisation and administration, history and evaluation (see also Jegede, 1993). Attention has also been given to how the areas of research or the research agenda has shifted over time (Holmberg, 1996; Moore, 1995).

Policy
Policy generally involves some authority (government, agency, institution or individual) which defines goals or intentions; provides, permits or constrains certain activities in pursuit of these goals; assigns responsibilities to agencies or individuals; and provides resources (equipment, facilities, money) to enable activities to be carried out. Policy and especially economic and social policy covers a range of sectors including education and research.

ODL policy might be part of or affected by a wider range of policies, particularly those dealing with higher education, for example entry requirements, standards and quality and especially funding. Within ODL there will be a range of policies dealing with the complexity of ODL systems, including admission, curriculum, media, support, assessment, accreditation, evaluation, research and so on.

Research policy
There are policies about much larger areas of research than ODL, for example, policy for science research may not have much influence on the more specialised field of ODL. Whereas policies on research into education, higher and continuing education and information and communication technologies are likely to have relevance for research on ODL.

Like policy generally, ODL research policy will be defined by relevant authorities, who will identify areas or topics for research, determine priorities, allocate responsibility for research, provide facilities and resources. Only certain areas of research might be approved, commissioned or competed for; it might be carried out by full-time specialists or those who teach as well, administrators or part-time staff might not be eligible; part or full funding and computing, survey and support facilities might be provided.

Policy research
There are many different kinds of research - pure and applied, theoretical, institutional, comparative, case study, experimental, survey, and policy research. It is policy research we are particularly concerned with here.

We can identify different kinds of policy research:
- Research for policy formulation - eg. market research, data analysis (inputs)
- Research into the policy process - eg. identifying stakeholders, the role of ideology, stages in policy formulation, comparisons between policies in different institutions or countries, (process).
- Research on policy effects, outcomes, impact and evaluation, (outputs).
Research into ODL policy processes, ie. pure policy research, is only one topic of research in a field that includes many other areas. However, many of these areas will have policy implications. For example research into - reasons for student dropout, the effectiveness of computer conferencing, quality of teaching materials etc, may have policy implications. This is policy oriented research, not primarily policy research. The definition of a research area is determined by the focus of the research. In the example of student dropout, the primary focus of the investigator is to understand the reasons for dropout, although a secondary objective may be to make policy recommendations.

*ODL research policy*

Logically ODL research policy is at the intersection of research policy and of ODL policy generally. ODL research policy, does not exist in isolation, but is part of a wider range of ODL policies, and may be part of more general policy regarding research. Similarly ODL policy research is a subset of the wider range of ODL research.

These overlaps and boundaries around the research and policy parts of the ODL system give rise to a number of links.

- Research policy ↔ ODL research
- ODL research policy ↔ ODL research
- ODL research policy ↔ ODL policy research
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- ODL policy ↔ ODL research

In other words, broader policies for research may have implications for ODL research (link 1 in Figure 1); specific ODL research policy will be directly relevant to ODL research (link 2); ODL policy research might be specifically directed at ODL research policies (link 3) or to ODL the full range of ODL policies (link 4). Other ODL research may have policy implications (link 5). The figure below summarises the boundaries and links.

Figure 1 Connections between research policy and ODL policy, research, research policy and policy research.
Within the context of research and policy there can be a specific interaction between ODL research policy and ODL policy research. For example, in an institution which has a particular policy regarding what ODL research should be carried out, policy researchers might wish to analyse what this particular agenda has been set, and what interests are being served by the restricted areas of inquiry. They might conduct a critical inquiry (or evaluation of) about ODL research policy with an intent to change it. At a broader level researchers might compare the research policies of a number of ODL institutions and assess their impact.

**Strength of links**
A number of factors affect the directionality and strength of the links. For example link 1, research policy generally is more likely to affect ODL research policy rather than the other way round. The resources given to ODL research within an overall research policy might be relatively small.

The strength of links 2 and 3 from ODL research policy will depend on resources allocated and other incentives aimed at promoting ODL research. A research policy without resources is unlikely to be successful. Similarly where staff are overloaded with other work, funds may not be taken up or research increased. Also this link might be in the reverse direction. For example, where research is being carried out, perhaps funded from external resources, which makes demands on institutional resources and a policy for their allocation.

However, links 4 and 5 more directly affect the development of ODL systems and here the strength of the link is crucial. Weak links between an institutions policies and ODL research activity will not assist in making improvements. The link can be two-way, with research being commissioned to inform policy and the results being used in the policy process. But not all policy research is commissioned, and when it is it does not mean that the results will be taken into account. On the other hand, non-commissioned research might be seized upon and used to inform a decision. Also commissioning research, eg a student survey, might be used as a way of postponing a decision, but showing that some action was being taken.

The strength of the link varies, rarely does research have a determining influence on policy, which is subject to a multiplicity of inputs - finance, power, vested interests, ideology etc. Furthermore the outputs from research are not just aimed at policy, they include - personal advancement, promotion and reputation, departmental status, contribution to knowledge, publication, products and services, external requirements, further funding, etc. The linkages and a their relative strengths are illustrated in figure 2.

**Figure 2** Linkages affecting research and policy
The figure could be reversed with policy preceeding research which is then used to evaluate the policy and possibly change it.

**Levels**
Policies may emanate from various levels: global and international, regional, national, local, institutional, faculty, departmental, team and personal. Policies regarding ODL can operate at the same range of levels and have direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional affects, and the research might be directed at different policy levels and on direct and indirect consequences.

Figures 1 and 2 could be replicated for each level, for example within an institution such as an open university there will be policies for research covering the discipline areas in which the institution has courses. ODL research may be included as part of the university's research policy or be subject to a specific policy with separate resources.

Within the institution there might be a range of ODL research projects being carried out, some focussing on policy and others with policy implications. Also at national level, there may be government departments, research councils and other bodies which have policies affecting research generally and ODL in particular. These policies might be aimed at promoting particular areas and kinds of research and provide funding and other resources. ODL policy research could examine national policies, not necessarily research policies, but policies about ODL generally, for example a review of the demand for ODL could be oriented towards informing policies for expansion of ODL at national level.
Table 1 A summary of the various levels and ODL research policy and ODL policy research.

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<th>Level</th>
<th>ODL research policy</th>
<th>ODL policy research</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Global</strong> - World Bank, UNESCO, ICDE</td>
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<td><strong>International</strong> - Commonwealth</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Regional</strong> - European Union, Asian Development Bank, EADTU, EDEN</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>National</strong> - UK, China, Sri Lanka</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Local</strong> - University of Highlands and Islands, Hong Kong</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional</strong> - UKOU, OUHK, OUSL</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty</strong> - Institute of Educational Technology, Education Studies, Division of Educational Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Department</strong> - Student Research Centre, Centre for Research in Distance &amp; Adult Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Team</strong> - Programme for Learner Use of Media, ICDL</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong> - N Farnes, ODL researcher, other academic</td>
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At the global level for example, the first column refers to the UNESCO's policy on ODL research; whereas the second column refers to research on UNESCO policies concerning ODL. Also in the second column levels of ODL policy research refer to the level (and area of responsibility of a particular body, eg. global in the case of the UNESCO) at which the research is directed, thus a faculty, team or individual might carry out research on the UNESCO's global ODL policy. Similarly at regional level, the European Union has a range of policies for ODL development and research (Tait, 1996).

**Institutional, faculty and personal levels**
As an example at institutional, faculty and personal levels a case study on the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) can be drawn on (Calder 1997). A summary outline of the situation in distance education research at OUSL at the beginning of 1966 prior to a 3 year development programme is described below:

**OUSL policy for ODL research**
- **Institutional level** - there was no explicit policy on the purpose, role and functioning of research and evaluation activity in the field of distance learning at OUSL. A laissez faire approach had been in operation with some ad hoc and irregular studies carried out by individuals and groups
- **Faculty (divisional) level** - the Educational Technology and Regional Educational Services Divisions are actively developing their research strategies.
- **Individual level** - staff undertake a range of ODL research for the purposes of achieving a higher degree, for publication and conference attendance.
Research is being done in OUSL on ODL policy

- Research for institutional purposes to inform management and course team decision making, includes student feedback studies.

- National and international level - a range of studies on national policy and comparative studies.

**National, regional and international levels**

The case study of the Open University of Sri Lanka gives some information on research policy at national, regional and international levels in terms of funding sources:

- National level - OUSL receives 66% of its funding from government, and research and development grants bring in additional funds. In general academic staff in Sri Lanka are expected to undertake research in their own discipline area.

- International level - bilateral, a major three year grant from the UK Overseas Development Agency provided consultancy help and support to develop ODL research and evaluation capacity in OUSL.

- International level - multilateral, Sri Lanka is a member of the Commonwealth as such benefits from its policy towards ODL through the Commonwealth of Learning, which has policies which support research in ODL.

- Regional level - OUSL is a member of AAOU’s, which has policies to promote research and research collaboration, and OUSL staff members attend regional conferences and present research.

**Interaction between levels**

There are interactions between ODL research policy levels. National policies on research generally and ODL related research in particular will have an influence on institutions and the ODL research they undertake. This is especially the case for ICT, where many countries are taking active steps to promote research into the application of new technology to education, often as part of broader economic and social development policies. Also in the case of the European Union, massive funding for research into new technologies for education and training is having a major affect on institutions research priorities in ODL. At global level, UNESCO’s policy of funding chairs (professorships) in institutions is being extended to give priority to ICTs in distance education.

Within ODL policy research the interaction between levels involves ensuring that the analysis of policy at one level is contextualised by other levels. For example, the reasons why an institution operates a particular admission policy is likely to be influenced by national policies regarding admission. Many so-called open universities adopt the same admission procedures and criteria as conventional higher education. Research into the impact of an institutions credit recognition and transfer policies will need to take into account policies in other institutions, national bodies and of international schemes. Analysis of how choices about what to teach are made, may
show that professional bodies operating national or international standards are the dominant influence.

Conclusions
This paper provides a framework for examining the research and policy nexus in ODL and raises questions about the connections and their strength within a wider context and of the relationships between different levels. The framework helps us compare experience across institutions, countries and regions. Careful documentation, analysis and evaluation, creates a basis for making generalisations and discovering what works under what conditions, and for improving the advice for policy makers and practitioners.

The CRIDALA conference is sharing knowledge of different ODL research policy environments. ODL research professionals are likely to be much concerned with their institutions research policy as well as other funding opportunities. Professional knowledge and reflection about the conditions (ie. policies, priorities, resources, funds, constraints) under which ODL research (policy as well as general) is carried out will be a continuing process. Furthermore the need for informed policy making, and the recent emphasis for 'evidence-based policy' places heavy requirements on policy research. Policy research is crucial for quality and continuous improvement, as well as the development of knowledge about ODL and related innovations. As organisations adopt more integrated approaches to knowledge management, the role of research and knowledge creation becomes central.

Discussion points:
1 What are your recommendations for your institution for ODL research policy?
2 What are your priority areas for ODL policy research?
3 How can the link between ODL policy and research be strengthened?
4 How can research be integrated into a knowledge management strategy for continuous improvement and learning within our institutions?
5 What policies should be adopted at national and international levels to promote ODL research?
6 What role is there for comparative research on ODL policy and research and how can this be carried out?

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