Advancing the research, evaluation and scholarship agenda in Asian ODL

Colin Latchem
Open learning consultant
Australia

Introduction

The main premise of this article is that while there has been a rapid expansion of applications of open and distance learning (ODL) in both formal and non-formal education and training throughout Asia, its introduction and practice are not always sufficiently informed by quality research and evaluation. It identifies problems in the ways in which some current ODL research and evaluation are conducted and suggests approaches that will advance the research agenda, improve understanding and practice in ODL and enable ODL to become a scholarly activity in its own right.

Why undertake research and evaluation?

Research and evaluation are needed at the:

National level
• To enable governments and other national agencies to assess the quality, cost effectiveness and legitimacy of ODL by comparison with more conventional face-to-face methods.
• To inform policy-making, policy-implementation and governance in ODL.

Institutional level
• To provide illuminating, timely, reliable and valid data to guide academic and administrative decision-making, strengthen practice and meet internal and external reporting requirements.
• To ensure that learners’ needs and circumstances are correctly defined and appropriately met.
• To ensure quality in all processes and outcomes.
• To ensure that providers are granted the status and resources they deserve.

Practitioner level (Woodley, 2004) or mission-critical level (Cookson, 2002), in the form of:
• Empirical inquiry: analysis, criticism and findings to guide future practice.
  or
• Theoretical inquiry: original perspectives, ideas and ideals to shape future thinking.
  or
• Action research: self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which their practices are carried out (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986).
• Reflective practice: reflection-in-action (undertaken during the event) and reflection-on-action (undertaken after the event) by individuals or groups to improve their practice in areas that particularly excite or concern them, to inform their future actions and to persuade others that they too can change (see Schön, 1987).

Research and evaluation can be:

- **Formative** – Feeding into the planning or implementation of programmes and other events to gain greater understanding and effect change and improvement.

  or

- **Summative** – Occurring at the conclusion of programmes or other events to measure their success against the original objectives.

- **Concerned with process, impact and outcomes.**

- **Quantitative** – Collecting measurable data that can be analysed to provide findings that lead to conclusions and recommendations.

  or

- **Qualitative** – Observing, questioning, documenting and interpreting processes to provide findings that lead to conclusions and recommendations.

  or

- **A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods**

In the absence of research and evaluation, it is all too easy to overlook chronic problems or exciting possibilities. In all cases, it is important to research exhaustively. As Woodley (2004) points out, the word ‘research’ means ‘search and search again’. There is always need for further research to support, extend, challenge or disprove existing theories and findings. Circumstances are continually changing, there are always new depths and complexities to be fathomed and new knowledge is forever throwing new light on assumptions and practices.

**Perspectives on Asian ODL research and evaluation**

There has been a rapid expansion of open and distance learning (ODL) in both formal and non-formal education and training throughout Asia. In some of this work, Asia is a world leader. It must be acknowledged too that there are some outstanding researchers in Asia - individuals and teams who enjoy high international reputations. And interest in research and evaluation is certainly growing within the Asian ODL community, particularly in the region's major universities and research centres such as The Open University of Hong Kong’s Centre for Research in Distance and Adult Learning (CRIDAL)\(^2\), Indira Gandhi National Open University Staff Training and Research Institute (STRIDE)\(^3\) and Commonwealth Educational

---

1 In recent years there has been a marked shift from ODL research based on quantitative, experimental methods to qualitative, descriptive research. Analysing over 1,400 articles in four leading peer-reviewed, English language ODL journals and dissertation abstracts, Berge and Mrozowski (2001) found that over 75% of these were descriptive of practices and outcomes, 9% were case studies, 8% were based on correlational research and 7% on experimental research.


3 see [http://www.ignou.ac.in/institute/index.htm](http://www.ignou.ac.in/institute/index.htm)
Media Co-operative/Centre for Asia (CEMCA). Findings are disseminated through national journals such as the *Indian Journal of Open Learning*[^5] and *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*[^6], regional journals such as the Asia-Pacific Educational Research Association’s *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*[^7] and the Asian Society of Open and Distance Education’s *Asian Journal of Distance Education*[^8]. They also feature occasionally in international journals such as the UK Open University’s *Open Learning* and Athabasca University’s online *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*[^9]. Conferences such as those organised by the Asian Association of Open Universities are also advancing the ODL research agenda as are initiatives by international agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO, Commonwealth of Learning, International Research Foundation for Open Learning and International Council of Distance Education.

However, there is evidence of some problems and shortcomings in the extent, methods and standards of some of the research and evaluation currently being carried out in the region. Before looking at this, it is important to stress that Asia is not alone in this regard. Much of what passes as research in ODL in general comes in for criticism. Naidu (2003) Passi & Mishra (2003) and Robinson & Creed (2004) suggest that ODL studies tend to be weak and reiterative, that they do not use valid and reliable instruments, that they fail to take into account complexities and variables (for example, the feelings and attitudes of teachers and learners), and that they yield little in the way of new information. And Daniel (2002) complains about the mass of trivial and badly conceived research that has been spawned as distance learning has become fashionable in conventional institutions. However, referring specifically to the Asian scene, it would seem that the introduction and practice of ODL are insufficiently informed by locally-undertaken quality research and evaluation.

In regard to research at the national level, the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge (UNESCO, 2003) concluded that in most Asian countries research into higher education is conducted in a top-down manner with governments funding research into national reforms that often lacks assessment, relevance and quality. The Forum also observed that rather than this research being carried out before policies are developed and implemented, there is a tendency to use the findings to justify or make adjustments to existing policies.

Turning to research and evaluation at the institutional level, Daniel (1996) and Ramanujam (1997) note the difficulty of obtaining reliable data on course completion rates in Asia’s open and dual-mode universities. It is also virtually impossible to trace any evidence of the educational and socio-economic benefits to the students or wider community. Rumble (1999) stresses the importance of cost efficiency, cost-utility, cost effectiveness and cost-benefit studies to convince politicians, donors, administrators and providers of the values of ODL, but relatively few such studies have been carried out in Asia.

Endeavouring to evaluate two major donor-supported non-formal education ODL initiatives in various Asian countries, Baggaley (2004) and Kobayashi et. al (2005) found that many of the project team members were either uncomprehending or reluctant to give details and that many of the projects lacked key performance indicators, thus making evaluation next to impossible.

[^4]: [www.cemca.org/](http://www.cemca.org/)
[^5]: [http://www.ignou.ac.in/ijol/journal.html](http://www.ignou.ac.in/ijol/journal.html)
Analysing ODL research in India, Sahoo (2001) identified gaps between the needs and priorities of ODL research and the work actually undertaken. Sesharatnam (1996) concluded that ODL research efforts were fragmentary and isolated from any established theoretical perspective. Powar (2001) found that most of the work lacked the quantitative and qualitative rigour of international research standards, and Kaul (1997) reported that the research tended to take the form of descriptive surveys, experimentation for testing the efficacy of various approaches, and qualitative data analysis.

Reviewing the 1995-1998 AAOU Conference Proceedings, Latchem, Abdullah and Ding (1999) found that only 38% of the 178 papers describing work in Asian open and dual-mode universities were based upon what might even be broadly defined as empirical research. The majority of the papers hypothesised about what led to success, were descriptive, re-worked familiar ground and relied primarily upon western theories, models and findings. The majority of these conference papers focused on instructional technology and design. Far fewer examined student needs, characteristics and performance, fewer still student support and quality assurance and only a small minority such topics as non-completion rates and dropout, staff development, course evaluation, policy-making/management, admissions/credit, costs/cost-benefits, cultural/social factors, gender, library/information services or plagiarism. From the performance improvement perspective, it was noteworthy that the more significant evaluations were usually carried out by senior managers or researchers rather than those members of staff directly involved in developing and delivering the programmes or services. This may well lead to problems in feeding the findings back into workplace cultures and practices.

It is also disappointing to discover that there is very little research into Asian educational philosophies and teaching and learning styles, how these might translate into appropriate forms of ODL delivery and how these differ (if at all) from ‘Western’ practices. The small amount of research on these issues that does appear in international journals is almost invariably western in its authorship and references. It is vitally important that Asian researchers reflect critically on such issues, both to guide their own work and that of their peers and to enlighten managers and practitioners elsewhere in the world. With the coming of globalisation and the internet, all practitioners of ODL need to see beyond commonly-held beliefs and stereotypes and be sensitive to cultural diversity in those they teach.

An examination of the Asian and international ODL literature reveals that most of the research and evaluation reflects work and thought in the university sector. Very few Asian researchers report on work that is occurring in, for example, open schooling, non-formal adult and community education or ODL for development purposes. This is both surprising and disappointing in a region where ODL and ICT are bringing information and learning to many millions previously denied access to such benefits. Inequities are being addressed, school enrolments are increasing and adult literacy rates are rising. Remote and disadvantaged communities, women’s groups, ethnic minorities and other unheard voices are being enabled to communicate, build coalitions, exchange and share, gain support and find solutions to their problems and grievances in ways never before possible. Many national, international and non-profit agencies, NGOs and corporations are helping with these developments, ranging from the World Bank\textsuperscript{10} to Microsoft\textsuperscript{11} and from the Commonwealth of Learning\textsuperscript{12} to Grameen Bank\textsuperscript{13}. It is critically important to develop a strong evidence base to justify and inform such development work and to show the kinds of interventions that are needed to optimise the use of the new methodologies and tools.

\textsuperscript{10} http://www.infodev.org
\textsuperscript{11} http://www.microsoft.com/unlimitedpotential
\textsuperscript{12} http://www.col.org
\textsuperscript{13} http://www.grameenfoundation.org/
Ramanujam (1997) suggests that ODL providers in Asia are most successful when they focus on developing systems for local needs and circumstances. He warns against trying to follow western examples too closely when there are so many differences in circumstances, cultures, resources and human capacity. He argues that while the current lack of theory and expertise will make the evolution of more indigenous models a slow and difficult process, as products of Asian circumstances, they will have greater strength and relevance.

Such a process of evolution requires managers and practitioners to move beyond their time-honoured thinking and practices and continually question their actions, successes and failures in order to inform their planning and operations. To satisfy the various stakeholders in ODL and to achieve the full potential of ODL, quality improvement and assurance must be guaranteed in all of those features that are open to public scrutiny. This calls for rigorous, honest and frank research and evaluation of curricula, teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and achievement, access, equity and costs. This may not be easy in organisations that are hierarchical and conservative, where roles and functions are bound by tradition, where consensus and harmony are valued over individualism and candour, and in cultures where criticism is deemed to be unseemly. These are some of the challenges to be faced up to in setting a research and evaluation agenda for Asian ODL and linking research to practice.

A research and evaluation agenda for Asian ODL

Table 1 below, based upon Berge (2001), Cookson (2002), Woodley (2004), Latchem et al. (in press) proposes an extensive research and evaluation agenda for Asian ODL. It shows that ODL not only needs to be informed by a profound understanding of the learners, their needs and circumstances, the material to be mastered and the learning process but also the efficiency and effectiveness of policies, procedures, practices and organisational systems, the nature of the student outcomes and the cost and other benefits.

Table 1. A research agenda for ODL in formal and non-formal education in Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of research</th>
<th>Research Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governmental/national level</td>
<td>Environmental scanning of ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL’s role in the nation’s development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL needs and opportunities in the national tertiary, secondary and primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>education systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL needs and opportunities in non-formal adult and community education and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rural, remote and disadvantaged regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy-making in ODL</td>
<td>• The political actions, policies and systems needed for sustainable ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>development in formal and non-formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The technology, infrastructure and logistics needed for ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The investments needed in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The key performance indicators needed for evaluating ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How to measure the benefits of ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formative and summative evaluation of ODL</strong></td>
<td><strong>Environmental scanning of ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The impact/effectiveness/cost-effectiveness of ODL institutions and non-formal adult and community education initiatives</td>
<td>• The characteristics of, and rationale for, ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ODL student outcomes, including post-study results</td>
<td>• Institutional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional level</strong></td>
<td>• ODL student profiles - learners’ needs, characteristics and circumstances, enrolment patterns, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy-making in ODL</strong></td>
<td>• Access and equity issues in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The organisational changes needed to encourage and support ODL</td>
<td>• Barriers to providing ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The changing roles of staff and learners in ODL</td>
<td>• Employers’ and community views on ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The opportunities for international, inter-institutional and inter-sectoral co-operation and collaboration</td>
<td><strong>Case studies, correlation studies and experimental studies in ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quality assurance in ODL</td>
<td>• Action research, pilot projects and developmental testing to guide ODL programmes, technology applications and future directions and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technology, infrastructure and logistics for ODL</td>
<td><strong>Formative and summative research of ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The economics of ODL – costs, tuition fees, cost benefits/effectiveness</td>
<td>• Appropriateness of curricula/courses to learners’ needs and employer and community expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Course accreditation and credit recognition and transfer</td>
<td>• Quality of teaching, learning and assessment in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Copyright, intellectual property, fair use policies, piracy and problems with hackers and viruses</td>
<td>• How ODL processes and outcomes compare with conventional forms of educational provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Case studies, correlation studies and experimental studies in ODL</strong></td>
<td>• The impact of policies and procedures on ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Action research, pilot projects and developmental testing to guide ODL programmes, technology applications and future directions and practices</td>
<td>• Strengths and weaknesses of specific ODL methodologies and technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formative and summative research of ODL</strong></td>
<td>• Teachers’ views and experiences of ODL methods and technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appropriateness of curricula/courses to learners’ needs and employer and community expectations</td>
<td>• Library and information services in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quality of teaching, learning and assessment in ODL</td>
<td>• Student counseling and support services in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ODL</td>
<td>Non-formal adult and community education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student-student and student-staff communications and interactions in ODL</td>
<td>• Using ODL to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals i.e. eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing a global partnership for development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student views and experiences of ODL methods and technology and their satisfaction levels</td>
<td>• Bridging the digital divide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ODL student enrolments and pass/failure/dropout rates, their causes and the remediation needed</td>
<td>• New technologies for ODL in low income nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cheating and plagiarism in ODL assignments</td>
<td>• The role of international and national agencies, public and private sectors and NGOs in non-formal ODL education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staff development needs in ODL</td>
<td>• The leadership and management required for such ODL initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staff recognition and reward systems in ODL</td>
<td>• The indicators, monitoring and evaluation required for such ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cost analysis/cost benefit studies in ODL</td>
<td>Case studies, correlation studies and experimental studies in ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL and adult literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL and gender equality – empowering women to build coalitions, educate themselves and solve their problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL for healthcare and welfare in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ODL for agricultural extension - helping poor farming communities adopt new practices, increase cropping intensities, diversify into higher value commodities and participate more fully in the food-market chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Telecentres or ICT-equipped vehicles to provide rural, remote and other disadvantaged communities with opportunities for education, training, information access, telework and local enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formative and summative evaluation of ODL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Problems in adopting new technologies and educational paradigms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practitioner or mission-critical level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Theory and practice of ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• The reasons for success and failure in ODL development projects</strong></td>
<td><strong>• The history of ODL (to avoid repeating errors made in the past)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Meta-analyses of ODL projects to help others working in the development field avoid reinventing the wheel and to provide governmental and other funding agencies with hard evidence of system-wide gains in access, economy, efficiency, effectiveness and impact</strong></td>
<td><strong>• The theoretical underpinnings of ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• ODL delivery systems</strong></td>
<td><strong>• The nature of open, distance, blended and online/virtual learning and practice around the globe</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• ODL learners and their learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>• ODL delivery systems</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Individual and collaborative learning in ODL</strong></td>
<td><strong>• Learning psychology, cognition/metacognition constructivism, etc. in ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Culture, gender and individual differences in ODL</strong></td>
<td><strong>• ODL learners and their learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• ODL curriculum development and course design</strong></td>
<td><strong>• Individual and collaborative learning in ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Organisational and management issues in ODL</strong></td>
<td><strong>• Culture, gender and individual differences in ODL</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case studies, correlation studies and experimental studies in ODL**

- Learner characteristics, experiences and outcomes
- Equity and access
- Teaching and learning methods
- Curriculum, course and materials development and delivery
- Instructional design and technology
- Learner support services
- Assessing and evaluating learning
- The storage, retrieval and dissemination of resources and information

**Formative and summative evaluation of ODL**

- The effectiveness of policy-making and management
- The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of courses
- The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of technology and media
- The effectiveness of learner support systems
- Staff and students’ views on methods and technologies
- The reasons for student failure and drop out
- The effectiveness of educational research and dissemination

**Linking research and practice**
The findings and observations above indicate that:

- Research into system-wide planning and change management has a particular significance in this stage of development of ODL in Asia.
- There is a great need to nurture a stronger ODL research culture in all sectors of Asian education and training – not simply in the universities.
- The development, extension and improvement of Asian ODL calls for a closer association of research with practice.
- A far wider range of Asian teachers, trainers, managers and administrators need to become reflective practitioners, questioning their actions, identifying problems and seeking solutions.
- Practitioners of ODL need to be self-critical and committed to excellence, continually testing theories, suppositions and innovations, collecting and analysing the data, translating findings into action, developing new questions and lines of inquiry, repeating the action research cycle and helping others to assimilate and utilise their findings. They also need to be looking beyond their immediate spheres and not confining their research to what is happening in individual institutions, courses and programmes.

The knowledge and skills needed to undertake such work may currently be restricted to a relatively few managers, teachers, trainers and researchers. However, would-be researchers can now learn how to engage in research and evaluation through online study, using the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training Programme (PREST) recently published by COL in collaboration with the International Research Foundation for Open Learning. PREST is designed for ODL practitioners by ODL practitioners. It draws on research and evaluation methods from education and social science, but provides examples from international ODL contexts. It aims to develop first-rung research and evaluation skills of immediate relevance in the workplace and to provide a strong foundation for progress to higher-level research programmes and qualifications. The entire programme may be downloaded and printed free of charge for personal non-commercial use.

Hopefully, PREST and such Asian agencies as STRIDE and CRIDAL will encourage more far more indigenous research into ODL applications in the wide range of educational, socio-economic and cultural contexts across Asia.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that research findings will automatically translate into greater understanding or improved practice. The findings may not find the right ears or receive a sympathetic hearing. There may be disagreement on the problems or the solutions. Failures can be hidden. Issues may be too complex to provide simple answers. And findings may have political consequences or threaten the status quo. It is therefore important that practitioners find ways of applying disseminating their research findings in ways that will support and encourage change. These issues are also addressed in PREST (see Stuart & Latchem, 2004).

**Failure as the key to success**

In ODL, is often the case that costs blow out, technologies fail to deliver as promised, teaching remains untransformed, students drop out or perform badly, management systems

---

falter, territorial disputes arise and faculty receive inadequate training and support for their work. Yet as shown above, these matters rarely receive a mention in ODL research articles and conference presentations.

Papers published in the field of ODL may offer compelling but incomplete and possibly misleading evidence of processes and outcomes. Some may be more correctly designated as self-promotional rather than investigative material. The true or full accounts of the circumstances and events they cover may only emerge if there is an opportunity to visit the institution or talk with the authors. Only then does it become apparent that, for example, the innovation suffered from a lack of support from the senior management, or the pilot project ended because of the departure of key personnel, or that the work ended with the withdrawal of the donor funding. This is a particularly worrying phenomenon because many managers and practitioners who are new to ODL - and particularly those who work in developing countries with limited opportunities to follow through on ideas and events - may gain incomplete or even false impressions of what is achievable. Koul (1998) claims that many politicians, planners and senior managers have been carried away by success stories of overseas ODL and have totally failed to comprehend the problems and complexities involved.

Denrell (2003) warns that failing to investigate, analyse and report on the causes of failures or near-failures can lead to self-delusion about the effectiveness of policies, plans, actions and outcomes. Rerup (2003) points out the dangers of focusing on success alone. He shows that organisations can learn as much from their failures – and indeed, their near-failures and their near successes – as they can from their successes. However, he acknowledges that researching failures and near misses requires imagination, diligence, courage and a willingness to ask awkward questions.

A research culture of never admitting to failure or being proved wrong is completely at variance with what is required for successful evidence-based policy and practice in ODL. It is essential to analyse what went right and what went wrong, to determine what could have been done better, to identify the problems that occurred at the macro and micro level, and to resolve these matters quickly. Otherwise ODL is condemned to repeating errors because of a failure to recognise and learn from lessons the first time round.

In some cases, the institutions themselves may be accountable for this state of affairs. In some organisations, it may not be so much a question of ‘publish or perish’ but ‘publish negative findings and find yourself a job elsewhere’. Claiming ‘world’s best practice’ and marketing themselves as ‘quality providers’, some institutions may look unfavourably on staff who reveal that their work evidences institutional or programme failure when they apply for conference funding, grants, tenure or promotion. This may be why so much of the research into ODL is positive or inconclusive in its findings: it is serving institutional and personal goals rather than providing enlightenment for the improvement of ODL.

It is critically important that all ODL managers and practitioners should carefully examine every research report and the assumptions that lie behind it and admit to failures, unresolved problems and uncertainties, and thus help others to apply (or avoid applying) certain measures. This calls for a culture that encourages the frank exploration of the causes, circumstances and contexts of failure and proclaims the lessons to be learned from these. This culture is most likely to be found in institutions where ODL is regarded as a scholarly activity.

**ODL as scholarly activity**
ODL calls for managers, teachers and trainers to embrace research and connect it with practice. Boyer (1990) argues that this can be achieved by using the familiar and honourable term ‘scholarship’, but giving this a broader, more capacious meaning. Boyer’s model can be adapted to develop a more inclusive, scholarly view of what it means to be involved in ODL. It enables teachers, researchers and technologists to move beyond their traditional disciplinary boundaries, communicate with each other, create a common ground of intellectual commitment and establish connections between theory, research and practice to inform and improve their work.

The first of these forms of scholarship Boyer calls ‘the scholarship of discovery’. This is disciplined research, free to inquire wherever this may lead. In the ODL context, this could involve theoretical inquiry or empirical research, developing fundamentally new understandings about, for example, cognition, organizations or technology.

The second function Boyer refers to as the ‘scholarship of integration’. This work is interdisciplinary. It occurs at points where fields converge and where isolated facts need to be put into a broader perspective. In ODL terms, it might be concerned with such issues such as how cultural factors in institutions inhibit or support change, or how teachers’ and learners’ prior experiences of the classroom influence their views on technology-based self study or how economic theories may be applied to ICT for development.

The third type of scholarship he terms the ‘scholarship of application’. Here new understandings arise in the very act of application. Theory and experience interact, informing and renewing each other. In ODL contexts, this work might occur when trying to implement changes in systems or institutions, when developing and delivering new courses and programmes, or when introducing or using new technologies or networks. It is very much akin to the concepts of action research and reflective practice described earlier in this paper.

The fourth type of scholarship is the ‘scholarship of teaching’. Boyer argues that teaching should not merely be a routine practice but a continually examined and scholarly enterprise that both educates and entices future scholars. He concludes that those who teach must be both steeped in the knowledge of their fields and capable of stimulating active learning and enthusiasm for learning in their students. In ODL contexts, this means continually engaging in reflective practice when establishing learning systems and networks, developing and delivering courses and course materials, and setting up student support systems.

**Conclusion**

There are clearly many needs and opportunities for Asian ODL managers and practitioners to engage in far more quantitative and/or qualitative research into what is occurring in formal and nonformal education and how ODL can be integrated across educational and training systems as well as within single institutions. There is need for:

- Far more robust and strategically significant findings that will inform and influence reform-minded decision-makers and practitioners.
- Both empirical inquiry - analysis, criticism and findings to guide future practice - and theoretical inquiry - original perspectives, ideas and ideals to shape future thinking.

For ODL practitioners to achieve the kinds of transformation they aspire to, they need to do more than simply inform each other about individual case studies and small-scale experiments. They need to:

- Broaden their research base, working more closely with planners and managers and forming research partnerships with educational, training and funding agencies.
• Engage in environmental scanning and present a broad overview of current thinking, priorities and developments at the regional, national and sectoral levels.

• Conduct meta-surveys and provide evidence-based advice on how ODL can provide greater access and equity, cost benefits, improved efficiency, effectiveness and quality.

• Show how to mainstream ODL and ensure its sustainability through appropriate governmental or institutional policies, plans and procedures.

• Throw light on the challenges of change and innovation.

• Show why some policies and programmes fail.

• Help ODL to be highly regarded and accepted as a scholarly activity in its own right.

References


