

Innovative Practices of Distance Education (including e-Learning) in Asia and the Pacific

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The present study aims at identifying innovative and good practices of open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia and the Pacific (AP) region at the tertiary education level, and sharing the findings to promote knowledge sharing with ODL institutions. To achieve these objectives, a survey of ODL institutions in the AP region and analyses of published documents and web sites have been conducted. The results of the study show that many ODL institutions have implemented quality assurance (QA) measures throughout their ODL practices including student services and tutoring, course development, staff evaluation, and student assessment; and most institutions have introduced ICT-based programs and services in pursuit of quality improvement and expansion. The paper concludes with a list of recommendation for the future development of ODL in the AP region.

Keywords: distance education, e-learning, quality assurance, ICT, student support

Introduction

Background

Some unique features of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Asia and the Pacific (AP) region include huge student population in ODL institutions, the concentrated efforts of governments with the establishment of dedicated single-mode ODL institutions, the rapid growth of information and communications technology (ICT) use, and globalization. All these features have contributed to the development of ODL and shaped current ODL systems in the AP region. Especially considering the high number of student enrollment, quality assurance (QA) efforts of the ODL universities are becoming more important than ever for the future of higher education in this region.

Several studies (for example, Farrell, 2001; Jung, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; OECD, 2004; UNESCO, 2003) have attempted to review current changes in ODL and to evaluate QA systems of ODL for higher education at the national or institutional level. These studies reveal that ODL institutions are in the midst of instructional and technological changes and the QA frameworks of ODL in a globalized context are still at the early stages of development. The previous studies also indicate the need for investigating a wide range of

innovative and good practices in different contexts of ODL.

Study objectives

This study is to identify information on innovative and good practices in ODL in the region, in particular areas such as quality assurance, curriculum, policy and management, student services and tutoring, ICT integration, cost-savings, collaboration, and for-profit involvement. In addition, the study aims to promote information sharing by publishing its results onto the UNESCO's ODL-KB website (<http://asiapacific-odl.oum.edu.my>).

Methods

To achieve the study objectives, data were collected from a survey questionnaire to selected ODL institutions in the AP region and analyses of existing documents and web sites. First, criteria for identifying innovative and good cases in ODL in the AP region were developed based on information gathered from ODL journals and newspapers, ODL related seminars at the regional and international level, UNESCO/COL/OECD/WB Databases, Distance Education Clearinghouse, and the researcher's own experience. As a result, 30 ODL institutions were identified.

Second, a survey questionnaire was developed by the author and reviewed by two ODL specialists of UNESCO. The final version of the questionnaire included items on basic information about the organization, national legislation and policies and internal policies regarding study areas, management strategies, academic programs, technology and delivery systems, international collaboration, quality assurance mechanism, cross-border activities, innovative or good practices within the organization. Key terms used in the study were provided as an appendix. Interested readers can find the survey questions and key terminologies at http://asiapacific-odl.oum.edu.my/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=76 (under Insung Jung's Innovative and Good Practices of Open & Distance Learning in Asia and the Pacific).

The survey questionnaire was sent to the 30 ODL institutions in the AP region. The survey was conducted between June and August, 2005. The selected ODL institutions for the survey included both public and private, single-mode and mixed mode, non-profit and for-profit, and conventional and ICT-based e-learning institutions. Both higher education degree and diploma-granting institutions as well as institutions that provide only professional development programs were included in the sample. Only 12 institutions returned the questionnaire of the survey. In addition to these 12 institutions, seven more institutions from for-profit private sector were added to the sample so as to present a wider range of practices in ODL. Table 1 shows the profiles of the 19 ODL institutions in the final sample. More detailed descriptions regarding data collection and analysis could be found at http://asiapacific-odl.oum.edu.my/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=76.

Table 1. 19 ODL institutions included in the study

Institution	Year of Establishment	Number of ODL Students (foreign students)	Type of institution	Homepage URL
AIOU (Pakistan) (data as of 2004)	1974	566,599	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.aiou.edu.pk
Anadolu (Turkey) (data as of 2005)	1958 (1982 named as Anadolu)	944,680 (305)	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.anadolu.edu.tr
Athabasca (Canada) (data as of 2004)	1975	28,898 (1,048)	Public, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://athabascau.ca
BBT (Japan) (data as of 2005) (MBA only)	2005	82	Private, For-profit, E-learning	http://www.bbt757.com
CCRTVU (China) (data as of 2004)	1979	2,006,710	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.crtvu.edu.cn
CredU (Korea) (data as of 2004) (Professional development only)	2000	400,000	Private, For-profit, E-learning	http://www.credU.com
IGNOU (India) (data as of 2005)	1985	1,311,145 (7,861)	National Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.ignou.ac.in
KNOU (Korea) (data as of 2004)	1972	183,475	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.knou.ac.kr
Monash (Australia) (data as of 2004)	1958	51,926 (all modes) 8,483 (DE mode)	National, Non-profit, Dual-mode	http://www.monash.edu.au
NetVarsity (India) (data as of 2004) (Professional development only)	1996	Around 500,000	Private, For-profit, E-learning	http://www.niit.com/index.asp
OUHK (China) (data as of 2004)	1989	22,263 (HK); 3,006 (Mainland China)	Public, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.ouhk.edu.hk
OUM (Malaysia) (data as of 2005)	2000	31,732	Private (consortium) For-profit, Single-mode	http://oum.edu.my
OUSL (Sri Lanka) (data as of 2004)	1980	21,976	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.ou.ac.lk
Ramkhamhaeng (Thailand) (data as of 2005)	1971	516,300 (95)	National, Non-profit, Dual-mode	http://www.ru.ac.th
U21G (International) (data as of 2005)	2001	700 (MBA only)	Consortium, Private, For-profit, E-learning	http://www.u21global.com
UOP (USA) (data as of 2005)	1976	Over 200,000	Private, For-profit Mixed-mode	http://welcome.phoenix.edu/online/default.aspx
USP (Fiji) (data as of 2005)	1968	18,000 (95: outside UP region)	International, Non-profit Mixed-mode	http://www.usp.ac.fj
USQ (Australia) (data as of 2005)	1967	26,174 (8,340)	National, Non-profit, Mixed mode	http://www.usqonline.com.au/
UT (Indonesia) (data as of 2005)	1984	248,781	National, Non-profit, Single-mode	http://www.ut.ac.id

Limitations

This study has three major limitations. The first is that the terms used in this study may have been somewhat different from institution's own understanding and thus resulted in different interpretations of the survey questions. The second limitation is that the criteria for identifying innovative and good practices in ODL in the AP region are biased towards large institutional ODL providers, formally accredited programs, or relatively well-known ODL institutions. Small scale, non-accredited ODL programs, local community-based non-formal ODL practices, unpublished ODL activities have not been included in this study. Finally, only a small number of ODL institutions responded to the survey due to time constraints. As a result, only a snapshot of recent innovative and good practices of ODL in the AP region could be presented in the paper.

Innovative and good practices

ODL practices are changing. New fields of study have been emerged, policies revised, a quality culture emerged, student services improved, new ICT-based delivery modes explored, and a variety of collaborative relationships developed. This section cannot provide a full picture of all the innovations and good practices of ODL in progress. Instead, it reports a snapshot of innovative and good practices of ODL in the AP region based on the survey results and other available resources. The innovative and good practices identified in the study are categorized into eight areas: quality assurance, curriculum, policy and management, student services and tutoring, ICT innovations, cost-savings, collaboration, and for-profit involvement. Within each area, specific cases are discussed. In this particular paper, however, only three areas which are more closely related to the features of the International Journal of Media in Education will be discussed due to the limit of paper length.

Quality assurance

Over the past years, developing and implementing policies to assure the quality has become a priority of ODL institutions QA is becoming even more important as ODL becomes popular and faces a proliferation of borderless education. A majority of the institutions investigated in this study have developed and implemented QA standards and procedures in the key areas of ODL activities and more than half of the institutions have institutionalized a central QA unit and thus sought the development of a more systematic and coherent quality culture. It is also noted that there exists a variety of QA systems of ODL even though the globalization and competitiveness of higher education and the development of technology have brought distance teaching universities closer together in terms of developing a common quality culture. Following cases show some innovative approaches to QA policies and measures in ODL institutions.

Shifting from provider-centered to learner-centered QA

Of particular interest to students in any ODL institution is whether they can receive enough support services from the institution and successfully complete their study. To improve its ODL practices in general and student support services in particular, the Anadolu University (Anadolu) has implemented the Total Quality Management (TQM) as the main management political

strategy since 1998. The Anadolu University Improvement Project was initiated by the Quality Commission to create QA strategies within the TQM framework. All the representatives of the University faculties were invited to participate in the project. As a result of this project, a widely shared quality consciousness in individuals and organizational units was developed and QA measures were tried out in various service processes. Each faculty (school) has developed its own Faculty Quality Management (FQM) model, leading to the clarification of the University Overall Quality Assurance Policy.

In this FQM model, the Faculty perceives itself as a service provider and students as a service receiver to be satisfied individually concerning their unique educational needs and expectations. Changes in perception, from teacher-centered to learner-centered, have led to major revisions in mission statements, organizational policies and implement strategies such as the employment policies and the technology investment strategies. Priorities have been given to the students rather than the university members or organizational units. Specific changes include:

- initiating highly interactive e-learning projects and virtual class models to meet the needs of Anadolu students to study in a more flexible environment,
- introducing an online academic advising system to increase two-way-communication opportunities,
- implementing the policy which requires all the faculties to respond to students' inquiries within 24 hours,
- adopting the strategy of blending physical and virtual contacts to introduce need-based student services, and
- including output variables such as students' satisfaction and graduation rate as QA factors.

As seen above, Anadolu's learner-centered QA system is still at its developmental stage and thus more detailed QA standards and procedures are yet to be developed. However, Anadolu's learner-centered QA approach still provides an insight to other ODL institutions that wish to implement QA measures in ways that assist in the progress of students in their studies and go beyond QA for the production and the delivery of course materials.

Linking QA to staff performance evaluation

While the ODL institutions share a quality culture in general, the level of QA policy integration in an overall university policy framework varies across the institutions. In the case of the Universitas Terbuka (UT) the internal QA policies are well integrated into the general university policy and staff performance framework, and QA results are often used for staff evaluation and promotion.

UT'S new quality assurance system encompasses nine components and 107 quality criteria or statements of best practices (Zuhairi, Pribadi, and Muzammil, 2003). Each criterion is further delineated into indicators and methods of achievement. Once the new quality assurance system was developed, UT undertook unit-by-unit and university-wide self-assessment and priority setting. Managers from all units were invited to conduct self-assessment using the criteria of the QA system and set priorities for quality improvement over the next four years. All operational units were involved in producing these job manuals. Under the supervision of the Quality Assurance Center within UT, 197 job manuals have been developed. These job manuals include:

- systems and procedures in performing particular jobs and activities,
- standards relating to time, output, workflow, resources and competencies needed to perform the task, and
- the relationship of tasks among different units.

To ensure that the manuals are used consistently by all the members of UT in carrying out their daily responsibilities, assessment forms have been developed to monitor and assess tasks performed by individual staff, to support self-assessment of each unit, to record processes and outputs of the tasks, to identify problems, and to offer solutions. Each manager is responsible for implementing QA and assessment in his or her unit. All the assessment forms are analyzed and the result summary is reported to the Rector. The UT's QA is linked to staff performance evaluation in such a way that units and individuals performing high quality works are fairly rewarded.

More than anything else, human resources play a significant role in QA implementation. Their performance is what makes a difference in ODL quality. In this regard, UT's fair performance appraisal system based on clear performance indicators provides other ODL institutions with a benchmark of monitoring organizational performance against objectives and key principles, and thus improving ODL quality.

Obtaining foreign accreditation

Most of the ODL institutions investigated were initially accredited by own government or a higher education accreditation body recognized by the central or local government. There are some exceptions. As a regional university, the University of the South Pacific (USP) was accredited by universities in the region. A more recent trend is for an ODL institution to obtain accreditation from outside of its own country. It implies that ODL institutions want to gain confidence of current students and prospective students around the globe in their ODL programs and services by meeting rigorous international QA standards. For example, the Monash University (Monash) has obtained ISO9001 certification for its services. UT and the Open University Malaysia (OUM) are developing QA systems to acquire ISO certification. UT is also in the process of seeking international accreditation and quality certification from the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). The Athabasca University (Athabasca) and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) obtained USA accreditation lately.

- In June 2005, Athabasca was accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, one of the six regional higher education accreditation boards in the USA. This accreditation is seen as "an indication of quality assurance and recognition of institutional excellence". During the lengthy evaluation process, Athabasca was able to reflect itself and identified both opportunities to improve and areas of strengths.
- USQ was recently accredited by the Distance Education Training Council, one of the accreditation agencies recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the USA and dedicated to identifying quality distance learning institutions. The accreditation is seen "an endorsement that will allow the University to better sell its distance education programs overseas". By achieving the USA accreditation, USQ's USA based students may be able to claim student financial assistance from their government.

In both cases, the USA accreditation is seen as an opportunity to have a better access to the ODL market in the USA and around the world. In the rapidly changing and evolving field of ODL and e-learning, foreign accreditation will certainly contribute to supporting capacity building efforts of an ODL institution and gaining international confidence in its courses and services.

Student services and tutoring

Student support system lies in the heart of any ODL activities. It is important for an ODL institution to offer opportunities for its students to connect with the institution and thus to develop valuable learning experience. Typical forms of student services in recent ODL include: face-to-face and/or online tutoring and counseling, telephone or email services, digital libraries, and mentoring. With the development of ICT, ODL institutions are able to offer individualized and interactive student services faster and easier than ever. Some examples include 24 hour telephone or email help desks, e-counseling, e-tutoring, and tutoring sessions via video-conferencing. This section discusses some innovative cases of student services and tutoring.

Implementing one-stop student services

OUM, as a private open university founded in 2000, provides one-stop comprehensive student services through the Learner Services Centre and 33 Learning Centres throughout Malaysia. The role of the central Learner Services Centre is to be a one-stop centre in providing support services to OUM learners in collaboration with 33 Learning Centres. These centres provide students with academic support and other services via face-to-face tutorials, faxes, and Toll free telephone sessions with tutors. Online services such as online interactions, MS ISO 9000:2001 certified digital library, and email-based supports are also provided.

More than 2,000 tutors are now employed to conduct tutorial and counseling sessions at the Learning Centres. To ensure the quality support for students, tutors are provided with extensive training and their performance is assessed by learners and Learning Centre administrators. OUM's tutoring groups are kept small, 20-30 learners per group, to ensure that quality learning takes place. OUM claims that overall, the ratio of tutors to learners is now at 1:16 level that is well above the international standards.

Since the quality of student support services is heavily depending on the tutors' performance, OUM operates a rather unique system called Lead Tutor system whereby senior tutors that are effective and active are selected to support other tutors. Currently close to 90 Lead Tutors are working at the 33 learning centres. The Lead Tutors' distinctive role is to support other tutors in both the face-to-face and online pedagogy. Here they are required to monitor the tutors during the face-to-face interactions as well as their online discussions. An online feedback form will allow the Lead Tutors to key-in the results and tutors can view the feedback. The results are also captured and stored in the Tutor Teaching Database for Deans to view for decision making processes.

It is the duty of any ODL institutions to reduce or eliminate existing or potential barriers to ODL activities of students. In this regard, providing high-quality, just-in-time services for ODL

students is essential. The concept of one-stop services shows ODL students ways to reach academic goals faster and more effectively. OUM's case provides other ODL institutions with an opportunity to review their various student services from the perspective of one-stop services.

Integrating ICT in student services and tutoring

ICT has contributed to the improvement of student support system in several ODL institutions. A combination of on-and off-line services is most common. Exemplary cases of utilizing ICT to improve student services and tutoring system are presented below.

- To provide adequate supports to large number of students, the China Central Radio and TV University (CCRTVU) has introduced a multi-tier service system (Yawan & Linshu, 2003). In addition to its existing arrangements with provincial Radio and TV universities, and local teaching centres, CCRTVU has also established a public support system platform, providing online access to learning resources, individual experts, and support for study groups. The Center of Learning Support Service at CCRTVU is responsible for provide off-and on-line services to the students.
- The Korea National Open University (KNOU) operates a three-layered tutoring system. Regular face-to-face tutoring sessions by faculty and part-time instructors, off- and on-line tutoring services by tutors, and special sessions offered by traveling faculty. The Traveling Faculty System is supplementary to regular tutoring sessions in 14 regional centres. KNOU's academic faculty are traveling around the regional centres each semester to offer special lectures, conduct seminar sessions, provide individual supports and interact with students face-to-face. Online tutoring sessions are offered to KNOU learners via Cyber Tutor System where each learner can receive personalized tutoring services.

The use of ICT in student supports is a powerful strategy for providing learner-centered services in ODL. In many ODL cases, some students demand the opportunity to study with their friends and to receive face-to-face lectures from their tutors. Other students may prefer studying alone and receiving online tutoring upon their requests. By blending conventional types of services with ICT-supported services, the above-mentioned cases have been able to increase students' satisfaction and improve learning.

Assessing quality of student services and tutoring

Several institutions such as Athabasca, UT, CCRTVU, the Open University Hong Kong (OUHK), KNOU, and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) have set up QA criteria for their student support services. Selected good examples are discussed below.

- IGNOU has suggested QA criteria such as timely dispatch of course materials, training of tutors and counselors in providing support to students, timely delivery of multimedia packages to study centres, quality of regular tutorials and counseling sessions, timely feedback on assignments, timely response to students queries, feedback to students on their performance and progress, and facilitation of peer group interaction.
- Learner support is mainly through part-time tutors at OUHK and involves combination of optional face-to-face tutorials, available telephone support, and online instructional support

through e-mail, discussion boards and synchronous chat. Tutors' performance is extensively monitored through Course Coordinator visits to tutorial sessions, review of sample of marked assignments, feedback received from students.

The two cases discussed above suggest two effective ways to assess the quality of student services: one is to provide extensive training sessions for part-time tutors and the other is to evaluate their performance and provide feedback.

ICT innovations

While ICT is not a panacea for all educational problems, technologies have become essential tools for teaching and learning in any mode. With advanced ICT, distance teaching is becoming one of the most challenging professions in our society where technology options are diverse and new concepts of learning are emerged. Distance teaching is now expected to facilitate self-learning, make it meaningful to individual learners rather than just to provide knowledge and skills, and improve interactions. Modern developments of innovative technologies have provided new possibilities to distance teaching professions, but at the same time have placed more demands on ODL institutions to explore how to use these new technologies in their ODL practices. The cases discussed below highlight some of innovative ways of utilizing ICT in ODL and show the diversity in ICT approaches to ODL.

Building e-learning capacity through multimedia project

The Multimedia Electronic Courseware Design Centre at the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), established in 2001, initiated the Multimedia project. Major goals of this project were to develop and deploy multimedia materials, perform related R&D activities, and build e-learning capacity at AIOU.

During the project, a series of training workshops for faculty were conducted. And QA activities for multimedia product were carried out by faculty members, media specialists, students, and external experts at various development stages. As results of the project, the multimedia labs were established at main campus and one regional office to be used for course development. And multimedia materials for 10 courses were developed and delivered. But most of all, expertise of faculty and staff in multimedia design and development had been accumulated during the project.

In many instances, there is not general learning superiority for one type of technology over another. It is not the technology but instructional design factors such as flexible course structure, quick and frequent feedback, visual layouts, and meaningful interactions that influence e-learning effectiveness and learner satisfaction (Jung & Rha, 2000). AIOU provides a lesson to other ODL institutions to focus on capacity building in instructional design rather than technical skill development during e-learning projects.

Increasing effectiveness and efficiency through online technology

Quite a few ODL institutions use a standardized online Learning Management System (LMS) to allow students to read and download materials, participate in discussions, send and receive emails, involve in synchronous chats, take online quizzes, and track their learning progress.

Some examples of utilizing LMS include that:

- OUM utilizes an online LMS called myLMS as a supplementary mechanism. Close to 29,000 learners are using myLMS as a virtual classroom. The learners can download reading resources and involve in a synchronous (chat) and asynchronous forum. OUM's standardized LMS has been an efficient tool to manage all these online activities.
- Apart from the above-mentioned OUM's myLMS, Credu's Cresys, KNOU's e-Campus, the Ramkhamhaeng University (Ramkhamhaeng)'s Cyber Class, Athabasca's myAU, BBT's Air Campus, USQ's USQConnect, and the University of the South Pacific (USP)'s WebCT are other examples of LMS.

E-testing is another way of utilizing online technology to improve effectiveness and efficiency in ODL. Examples are discussed below.

- In the year 1999, a system called the Internet-Based Trial Exams was established to help students get ready for the exams at Anadolu. There are more than 13,000 questions in the question bank for the Internet-Based Trial Exams. More than 450 students have enrolled the system, and taken 22 million exams over the system since the beginning of this service. The trial exams are continuously updated and expanded as textbooks are upgraded. Without this e-testing system, Anadolu would not be able to support students in such a flexible way.
- The University of Phoenix (UOP), Credu, Ramkhamhaeng, UT, Athabasca and KNOU have also implemented e-testing systems either in full or limited scope.

Experiences of the above-mentioned cases show that an LMS makes it easy to implement a variety of online learning activities including interactions and content delivery. Similarly, an e-testing system makes it possible for an ODL institution to administer a wide range of assessment to a large number of students. These online tools may not be directly related to QA efforts but certainly they add aspects of effectiveness and efficiency to QA developments in ODL.

Experimenting e-books and mobile technologies

An e-book is a book available fully electronically via a web-site on the Internet. E-book readers such as Acrobat Reader have been developed for devices such as Palm Tops and desktop PC's, including the notebook PC. Several ODL institutions have developed e-books for their students. While students can read e-books on a computer screen without being charged and download those e-books with minimal costs, copyright and health issues are yet to be discussed. Good examples of utilizing e-books in ODL include that:

- Ramkhamhaeng has developed a collection of e-books which replace conventional textbooks. These e-books are open to anyone who is interested in studying Ramkhamhaeng's textbooks. Each e-book is provided both in .html format for reading on the screen and .pdf format for downloading.
- All students enrolled in UOP can complete 100% of their educational and administrative activities online and can access an online collection of over 14,000 digital journals, 20,000,000 full-text articles, some 600 e-books for their classes and research. Its e-books have been written completely for the university by external experts. Once students pay

US\$70 resource fee per class, they are guaranteed access to the e-books and other digital materials even after graduation.

- The e-book projects started in the 2003-2004 academic year at Anadolu. Each distance course textbook was converted to PDF file and then delivered on the Internet. This e-Book service allows Anadolu students to read the books on the Internet before they receive the printed versions. 163 e-books which include more than 2000 units are now in service.

In some cases, mobile technologies, both old and new, have been introduced in a limited context. Three exemplary cases are presented below:.

- Ramkhamhaeng has created a “Mobile University”, the first of its kind in Thailand. This mobile university is targeting both students of Ramkhamhaeng and those who are not enrolled at the university. The mobile university is in the form of a luxury coach fitted with 39 computers complete with a satellite hook-up and scheduled to bring education via the Internet or satellite to rural areas of the country. The coach has been used not only for educational purposes, but as a centre for people in remote areas to utilize new technology, especially the Internet, to help them conduct e-commerce. Since 2002, the “Mobile University” has reached out to nearly 50 provinces in Thailand.
- Since 2001, KNOU has converted most of the courses delivered via radio and TV into MP3 files and provided those files via the Intranet to its students. The students can download these lecture files to their MP3 players and study while working or moving around. KNOU has also developed MP3 Audio CD-ROMS to be distributed to over 100 visually impaired students without charge.
- The audio book project at Anadolu, which targeted the students with visual disabilities, was started to be available in 2004-2005 academic year, and five 1st year books were vocalized by professionals in a radio-phonetic way. The audio books of ten 2nd and 3rd year courses will be ready by the end of 2005. The books will be delivered to the students in CD, MP3, cassette, and online format as well.

As the need for mobility is growing and mobile technologies are rapidly becoming prevalent in education, ODL institutions should consider integrating mobile technologies in content presentation, interactions, assessment and measurement, and support services. The cases discussed above provide guidelines for utilizing a wide range of mobile technologies to widen access for the ODL learners who are studying under difficulties such as slow mailing systems, lack of high speed Internet connections, and physical disabilities.

Conclusions

In general, ODL in the AP region is playing an increasingly significant role in national higher education system and becoming an important policy choice for most countries. Moreover, ODL is slowly gaining ground in transnational education market and beginning to offer more flexible and interactive learning experiences through advanced ICT.

The results of the study show that:

- Many ODL institutions have implemented QA measures throughout their ODL practices including student services and tutoring, course development, staff evaluation, and student assessment.
- Some ODL institutions have obtained accreditation from outside of their own country to achieve an international recognition and improve their market value.
- In several ODL practices, new collaborative partnerships have been emerged. Such partnerships include private and public collaboration, for-profit and non-for-profit collaboration, regional and international collaboration, and specific task-oriented partnerships with other ODL institutions or international organizations.
- Most institutions have introduced ICT-based programs and services in pursuit of quality improvement and expansion. In some institutions, the use of ICT in distance teaching and learning is no longer considered an experimental work.
- Moreover, several ODL institutions in the AP region have updated existing curriculum to meet the emerging needs of new ODL learners.

The cases presented in this paper will provide valuable help for those ODL institutions which are in search of benchmarks. Nevertheless, the study also shows that we are not yet at the stage where attention to QA is covering all parts of our ODL activities. And in quite a few cases, innovative approaches have touched only a small portion of ODL students and staff. Moreover, cross-border educational activities are still at the margins in most ODL institutions, and gender-related innovations have not been reported in any of the survey replies.

For further development of quality ODL in the AP region, much still needs to be done.

- First, it is necessary to develop a holistic QA strategy and strong QA frameworks to improve quality of ODL practices as a whole.
- In addition, re-conceptualization of the role of an ODL provider in cross-border higher education market is also necessary for future development of ODL in the AP region. ODL institutions in the AP region need to be proactive rather than reactive to the challenges of the expansion of for-profit ODL programs and transnational education.
- At the same time, ODL institutions in the AP region need to address issues that are pertinent to the region such as gender gap, digital divide, human rights, and equity in developing and implementing ODL policies.
- Finally, we need to learn from previous studies in distance education and educational technology showing the importance of instructional design and pedagogical philosophy behind the design activities in creating ICT-based learning environments. The starting point must be the learners' learning problems, not technology.

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