

Asian Leaders in Open and Distance Education

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Introduction

The Asian distance education system is probably the largest in the world. No other continent has seen such a serious policy discourse, as well as determined efforts in its practice, as Asia, since the focus invariably has been democratisation of education, access and equity, cost of education, and socio-cultural and political legitimacy through education as empowerment. Technology, which has taken centre stage in the Asian countries today, was a major consideration for such educational endeavours and could pave the way for successful implementation of earlier correspondence education, followed by distance, online and blended learning. This continent has seen great leaders who have contributed not only to their own system of education but also to the world, especially the Commonwealth. It may not be out of place to note that Asian leaders have risen to become vice president of the COL (G. Ram Reddy), president of COL (Gajaraj Dhanarajan and Asha S. Kanwar), president of ICDE, under whom the ICCE was rechristened as ICDE (Bakhshish Singh), and president of ICDE (Tian Belawati). It has been very difficult to select leaders of distance education as profiled in this article, and the utmost attempt has been made to avoid any subjectivity or personal bias. It has been a challenge to cover the entire spectrum of Asian countries to identify leaders and despite efforts this may not have been very comprehensive due to the enormity of activity and personnel involved in Asian distance education.

Bangladesh

The following leader has been chosen though there are a few other leaders, including Prof. Badrul Khan, who was born in Bangladesh but contributed significantly from the United States (see Ally, 2017).

M. Shamsheer Ali

Prof. M. Shamsheer Ali, founder vice chancellor of Bangladesh Open University (BOU), an eminent scientist of international repute, is a widely acclaimed distance educator in Bangladesh. He is known for his promotion of public understanding of science using the methods of distance education. His advocacy initiative for BOU in the mid-seventies was tremendous when he launched a movement for it in the media. The government made him the founder vice chancellor of BOU in 1992 and Project Director (PD) of the BOU Implementation Project, with financial assistance from Asian Development Bank (ADB). As per the provision of the BOU Project Profile, BOU was supposed to enroll learners after the development of infrastructure. However, Prof. Ali, in contravention to this provision enrolled students using government infrastructure. He successfully ran most of the programmes of the BOU portfolio using self-learning materials (SLMs), radio-TV broadcasts and tutorial support



services. After his BOU tenure, he joined a newly established private university - Southeast University (a leading private university now) again, as founder vice chancellor — where he introduced an interactive MBA programme through eLearning. Prof. Ali was instrumental in developing the Quality Assurance Instrument for the International Distance Education Accreditation League (IDEAL), based in Manila, of which he is a director.

He successfully conducted the senior school certificate programmes for students who dropped out after finishing their grade eight studies. This programme of BOU (which has now turned into a mega university) has been of paramount interest for the education of rural women, especially as part of their empowerment. He developed good collaboration with many distance education universities, including those of the subcontinent, especially with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) during the tenure of Prof. Ram Takwale as its vice chancellor. He also played a prominent role in the promotion of public understanding of science through radio and TV. At present, he has conducted more than three hundred programmes on TV, on different aspects of science and technology using DE skills, including some on BBC on science and culture. The foundation laid by Prof Ali has facilitated subsequent (distance) educators and vice chancellors of BOU to take forward the cause of ODL, including that of OER policy and practice in 2016-17.

India

The Late Gaddam Ram Reddy

There will be hardly any one from the developing world who has held top positions in diversified national and international fields of education (both mainstream as well as distance education) like Prof. Ram Reddy, who was born in 1929 to a farmer's family and rose to be one of the greatest educators in the country. He founded the first open university in India (APOU/ BRAOU) in 1982 and the first national open university in the country (IGNOU) in 1985; was the first vice president of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL); was chairman of University Grants Commission in India; chairman of Indian Council for Social Sciences Research (ICSSR); and founding chairman of National Assessment and Accreditation Council. He was one of the legendary pillars of distance education in the world; and is popularly called 'the father of distance education in India'.

After being the vice chancellor of Osmania University and founding vice chancellor of BRAOU, Prof. Reddy could not sit idle. International developments and the domestic pressure for mass education ignited him to dig out the old Parthasarathy Committee report on national open university for India and pursue it vigorously. In recognition of his leadership and persistent endeavour, the Government of India invited him to establish the national open university (IGNOU) which eventually was passed in the Indian parliament in 1985, and Prof Reddy became its founding vice chancellor. During three years of his tenure, IGNOU established a large network of regional study centres in the country, and laid the foundation for many state open universities to come later. That was the foundation for a robust national system of ODL which contributed to adoption in quite a few countries in the developing world.

Prof. Reddy became the president of Association of Indian Universities in 1987, and in 1989 a member of the Commonwealth Committee, the report of which led to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), of which he became the founder vice president. In 1991, he was brought back to the country by the Government of India to be appointed as the chairman of the University Grants

Commission, and subsequently established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council as its founding chairman. That was followed by his appointment as chairman of ICSSR. Prof. Reddy had many awards to his credit, including doctorate *honoris causa* from the British Open University, DLitt *honoris causa* from IGNOU, and a national citizenship award by the Prime Minister of India.

It was in the ICDE Birmingham conference (1995) that Prof Reddy, along with Sir John Daniel, was honoured with a lifetime achievement award in the field of higher and distance education with a full standing ovation. Subsequently, Prof Ram Reddy was posthumously conferred with a Honorary Fellow of COL.

The Late V C Kulandai Swamy

Prof. Kulandai Swamy was Civil Engineer by training. He taught at IIT Madras before moving to head Council for Higher and Technical Education, Chennai. On completion of this assignment, he took over as Vice Chancellor of Madurai-Kamraj University, Madurai and then two consecutive terms as Vice Chancellor of Anna University. In 1991, he was appointed (the second) Vice Chancellor of IGNOU. Though he was relatively new to ODL system when he joined IGNOU, it did not take him long to impress everyone with his vision, clarity of ideas, resoluteness in action, flexibility, accommodation, adaptability, foresightedness, conviction and ability to operationalise concepts.

He was a scholar par excellence with a wide spread of accomplishments ranging from fundamental research in water resources engineering to Sahitya Akademi Award in Tamil literature. He was a poet at heart and some of his poems form part of the school curriculum.

He tightened administrative structures in IGNOU through foresighted provisions in Statutes and Ordinances for good governance and laid down guiding principles for transparent administration and financial discipline. In this process, he created various authorities in the university. He was instrumental in creating Distance Education Council (within IGNOU), which was mandated to promote, monitor and regulate single as well as dual-mode distance teaching institutions in the country. This gave ample evidence of his negotiation skills and persuasive powers. As founding Chairman of Distance Education Council, he gave new dimensions to the open and distance learning system in the country. He was an ardent advocate of teaching at a distance. To encourage research in distance education, the *Indian Journal of Open Learning* was started by IGNOU under his guidance.

Under his leadership, IGNOU achieved the unique distinction of being the first university in India to be recognised as Centre of Excellence by Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada, for the creation of high quality self-instructional materials.

After superannuating from IGNOU in 1994, the idea of a technology based university fascinated him. To translate his vision into reality, he took it upon himself to convince the Government of Tamil Nadu about the usefulness of the initiative, and with his untiring efforts, Tamil Virtual University (not a university offering degrees) was established in Chennai in the year 1998 to promote Tamil language and literature amongst the Tamil diaspora around the world. Till now, this remains the only university of its kind in India. Prof Kulandai Swamy was conferred Honorary Fellow of COL.

Ram G Takwale

Prof. Ram Takwale was born (1933) in a small agrarian village, had his school education mostly in villages, attended higher education in Pune University, and took a Ph.D. from Moscow State

University. He has taught Physics and guided research students in Pune University for over two decades. His teaching and research interests shifted from theoretical physics to studies and developments in education during the latter part of his career.

Dr Takwale was vice chancellor of three universities: Pune University (1978-84); Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) (1989-95) where he was also founder; and IGNOU (1995-98). Since 1985 he has been working in the field of Open and Distance Education, and has been interested in massification of quality higher education by using the latest Information Communication Technologies. In a way, it may not be inappropriate to state that he is an exemplar of being both a pioneer and a practitioner of ICT for education, training, administration and management, and community development.

YCMOU was an example of openness to people and their needs in terms of certificates /diplomas in skills, and vocational degree courses linked with life and work, as well as linking agrarian courses with the quality of agri-products and markets was a new way of applying ODL to farm-field related activities (Deshpande, 1999). Courses for workers in factories and workshops in technical subjects were developed and deployed successfully at YCMOU, and, later on, by IGNOU for tannery workers and construction workers at their work places. This work-place based education offered different dimensions for linking skills with work and further with cognitive learning processes. For this pioneering work, YCMOU was awarded Excellence in Distance Education, and Dr. Takwale as Honorary Fellow by COL, Vancouver. The foundational work of Prof Takwale has been carried forward by successive vice chancellors at YCMOU, and this is an area of learning for ODL institutions in the country and overseas.

Dr. Takwale tried to add a role of National Resource Centre to IGNOU's then Distance Education Council, by pooling quality content for courses created by all open Universities in India. All courses of IGNOU were added to the common pool for sharing with all open universities by forming Indian Open Education Network (OPENET) in 1996-97.

During his tenure IGNOU started the direct uplink of TV programmes from its campus and mainstreamed the one-way video and two-way audio communication system. Dr. Takwale formed, with the help of UNESCO (Bangkok), an association of South Asia Federation for Distance Education Development (SAFDED), and organized some international workshops for training distance educators from South Asian countries. IGNOU expanded outreach of its educational programs to Middle-East countries during his tenure.

Dr. Takwale's Committee Report for Use of ICT in Higher and Technical Education in Maharashtra in 2000 was instrumental in creating MKCL (Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Ltd.) in 2001. This was a corporation involved in a cooperative endeavor started by the state government and universities in the State of Maharashtra for profit to support education in Maharashtra /India. Dr Takwale served MKCL as Honorary Director for a decade, and is now serving as Chief Mentor to activities of MKF, a non-profit company of MKCL for social development. MKCL and MKF are forming a digital platform for techno-educational facilities appropriate to the new age digital society. Prof Ram Takwale continues to be an Honorary Fellow of COL.

The Late H. P. Dikshit

Prof. Hanuman Prasad Dikshit, obtained D. Phil. D. Sc. and D.Sc./D. Lit. Honaris Causa degrees from one conventional and three open Indian universities. He served as the vice chancellor of Madhya Pradesh Bhoj (Open) University (MPBOU) and IGNOU for a period of five years each and also of two conventional universities. He served on various apex level National Boards/Committees/Councils of Indian Government responsible for drafting policies, development plans and their implementation in the field of education and distance education. Elected as the first President of SAARC Consortium of Open and Distance Learning and Vice President World Summit of Mega Universities (GMUNET), he has also been Chairman High Power Committee for Distance Education of the University Grants Commission.

The policy document *Directions of development*, developed by him as Vice-Chancellor MPBOU (1996-2001), conceived major applications of ICT to reach the unreached. The University envisaged Multimedia Regional/Study Centres to effectively reach very distant places through point-to-point communication. He revived the Computer Literacy and Awareness (CLASS) Scheme for 400 Schools in Madhya Pradesh, India and in 1998 launched an online programme on Communicative Skills. Under his leadership, MPBOU developed educational software for thousands of primary schools, which became very popular in other states and turned out to be a source of revenue generation.

On joining IGNOU as vice chancellor (2001-2006), he dreamt of a mission of a well-connected India by re-engineering and re-shaping ICT enabled systems to meet the requirement of education and capacity building programmes, with grassroots access, across the institutions and other sectors. Thus, by 2004 a dedicated satellite – EDUSAT – was launched and Dr. Dikshit was appointed Chairman of the National Steering Committee for utilisation of capabilities like virtual classrooms, video on demand, database access, national repositories, radio networking, KU and Extended C Band interactive terminals with a footprint covering India and beyond. During his tenure, the Inter-University Centre for Technology-Enabled Flexible Education and Development and National Centre for Innovations in Distance Education was established at IGNOU; and the former took forward reforms in ICT-enabled education by taking IGNOU and national DE system from traditional DE delivery to multimedia and online delivery. He will be remembered as a policy pioneer in the use of technology to enrich educational experiences.

Abdul Waheed Khan

Prof. Abdul Waheed Khan, with Master's and Doctoral degrees from University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, is an internationally recognised leader in the application of information and communication technologies for education and development. He has always championed the cause of empowering people through access to information and knowledge. His journey from a remote village in India to high-profile positions in education, international development, diplomacy and media is an exciting story of a self-made man, a visionary, an institution builder and a dynamic leader. Dr. Khan served as Assistant Director General for Communication and Information at UNESCO in Paris for nearly a decade. In this capacity, he was responsible for UNESCO's global programmes in communication and information and its strategic initiative for building "Inclusive Knowledge Societies" leading to the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). He also served as vice chancellor of IGNOU and most recently served as the Founder President of Talal Abu-Ghazaleh

University of Business (TAGUB) in Bahrain. He has served in senior management and professional positions at the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Vancouver, Canada for nearly seven years. Dr. Khan was responsible for developing educational communication and information programs of COL throughout the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Educational Media Center for Asia (CEMCA), which he conceptualised and established, is a vibrant organisation serving open and distance learning communities in Asia.

He is an educational communications expert who has contributed immensely to building systems and processes for improving access to education through use of radio, television and the Internet. He has significantly contributed to setting up the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), as a process to build knowledge societies. He also focused on open solutions as ways to increase access to knowledge, and promoted the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs), Open Access to scientific information, and Open Source Software. Prof Khan was subsequently conferred Honorary Fellow of COL.

Asha S Kanwar

Professor Asha Kanwar is one of the world's leading advocates for learning for sustainable development, and technology/ ODL and women's empowerment. She was appointed President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2012, becoming the first woman to head a Commonwealth intergovernmental organisation.

She first joined COL in 2003 as the Education Specialist – Higher Education and Policy – later serving as Vice-President for six years. Prior to COL, she worked in Africa as a senior consultant in open and distance learning at UNESCO's Regional Office for Education in Africa (BREDA) in Dakar, Senegal. During this assignment, she promoted and coordinated open and distance learning in Sub-Saharan Africa and she was instrumental in placing it at the centre of ministerial deliberations and the agenda for the development of education in Africa. The West African initiative led to the establishment of an ODL Resource Centre at BREDA and later to the development of a regional Centre of Expertise at the National Open University of Nigeria.

She received her undergraduate, Master's and MPhil degrees from Panjab University in India. She was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy in 1986 at the University of Sussex and was a Fulbright Fellow for post-doctoral research at Iowa State University, where she was later invited to teach and also her book was a recommended reading in many American universities. Her engagement with distance education began in 1988 when she joined Indira Gandhi National Open University as a Reader. She later became Professor and Director of the School of Humanities and was appointed pro-vice chancellor of the university from 1999 to 2000.

Prof. Kanwar has received several honorary doctorates, including one from the Open University, UK. A recipient of several awards and fellowships, including the International Council for Distance Education Prize of Individual Excellence in 2009, Prof. Kanwar was elected as a member of the ICDE Executive Committee, effective September 2015, for a four-year term. In all these capacities, she has stressed the importance of distance education and blended learning to the level of community through agriculture and livelihood programmes, and especially programmes for women's entrepreneurship and empowerment.

Rudder Datt

Principal Rudder Datt (as he was often called as) is credited as the head of the first university correspondence education institute in the country in 1962, when the School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education was established at the premier University of Delhi. This example of successful implementation led many universities to open up correspondence courses. As an old guard in distance learning and higher education politics in the country and also as an economist, Rudder Datt conducted the first comprehensive study on costing of correspondence/ distance education and campus-based education in India. This subsequently led to policy articulation for funding of distance education in the country.

Bakhshish Singh

Prof. Bakhshish Singh is one of the old guards of correspondence/ distance education in India and also on the global scene (working alongside stalwarts like Prof. Börje Holmberg, Prof. Charles Wedemeyer, among others). He was founding director of correspondence/ distance education at Punjabi University, and subsequently moved to IGNOU to establish the school of humanities and social sciences. His last assignment was DE adviser to University Grants Commission when Prof Ram Reddy was its chairman. He was a member of the third delegation to the erstwhile USSR to study correspondence courses and evening classes, which led to the establishment of such reforms in India. He founded the National Council for Correspondence Education in the 1970s, and was responsible for drafting the proposal for National Institute of Correspondence Education in 1993, though, for various reasons, this could not be established (Yadav & Panda, 1999). Prof Singh pioneered institutional research in DE at IGNOU-DEC (Singh, Mullick, & Chaudhary, 1994), though he will be best remembered as the leader who as vice president of ICCE renamed the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) to International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) in 1982 as its first president.

Other Significant Mentions

Other leaders who could not be profiled here due to lack of space include: Prof. V. S. Prasad who has been vice chancellor of BRAOU and director NAAC and is a Honorary Fellow of COL; Fr T. N. Kunnunkal who was founding chairman of the National Open School, which later became National Institute of Open Schooling; Prof. R V R Chandrasekhar Rao who has been vice chancellor of BRAOU and Director, COL; Prof O S Dewal who founded the Open School (which was later renamed as NOS and subsequently as NIOS (Mukhopadhyay, 1994); Prof. Marmar Mukhopadhyay, former chairman of National Open School and Vice President, ICDE; and Prof. B. N. Koul, who established the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education at IGNOU and is a Honorary Fellow of COL.

Indonesia

Tian Belawati

Professor Tian Belawati has made lifetime professional contributions to open and distance learning (ODL). She served as the Rector of Universitas Terbuka (UT) (Indonesia's only open university) from 2009-2017, during which she took decisive actions to mobilise effort in partnerships with stakeholders to improve the quality of ODL, develop greater public confidence in ODeL, and establish

collaborative effort with international as well as regional ODeL institutions and associations. She is extensively involved in various joint initiatives with other ODeL players and organisations in her capacity as both an ODeL researcher and top administrator. Her professional achievements have led to her appointments as Secretary General (2007-2009) and then President (2009-2010) of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU); and her leadership was further acknowledged at the global level through her appointment as a member of the Election Committee (2007-2009), a member of the Executive Committee (2009 to present), and as the President of the International Council for Open and Distance Education/ICDE (2010-2015). After the ICDE Presidency, Prof. Belawati was asked to join the ICDE Board of Trustees starting in 2017.

Professor Belawati has had extensive experiences in research, teaching, and administration of a large-scale, open-university system, i.e., Universitas Terbuka (UT). During her term of rectorship, UT introduced the research-based policy making that has paved the way for the achievement and future direction of UT as a reputable quality ODeL provider. She introduced innovations and good practices in the use of new technology for the delivery of ODeL. Her two-terms as Vice Rector, from 2001 up to 2009, took UT into a new ODL platform in a developing country context through utilisation of new and appropriate technology. Among others, she introduced innovations through UT Online, such as online tutorials, open educational resources (OER), online examination, digital library, integrated information system for learning materials development, and other ICT-based initiatives in teaching, learning and academic administration.

She initiated advocacy at the national level on mainstreaming ODeL in Indonesia. This resulted in the recognition of ODeL and the inclusion of ODeL in the National Education Law and its derivations. In addition, this recognition also resulted in the specifications of ODeL quality parameters used by the National Accreditation Board. UT is now the biggest ODeL provider in Indonesia. She was the chair of the prestigious PANDora project of IDRC for transformation of distance learning technologies in the Asian continent (Belawati & Baggaley, 2010).

I must also note the significant contribution made by Prof. Atwi Suparman, who was the Rector of Universitas Terbuka, and also to Indonesian as well as Asian distance education including through the Asian Association of Open Universities.

Japan

Yoichi Okabe

Especially after the renaming of U-Air as the Open University of Japan (OUJ), its own broadcasting centre and media-based learning centres have turned more toward recent developments in web-based education. The university judiciously mixes broadcasting, online learning and F2F interaction at its learning centres, and, about two years prior to the time of writing, offered academic programmes fully online. Prof. Okabe led the transformation of U-Air into OUJ as its founding vice-president and in 2011 became its president. Starting his career at the University of Tokyo, he became the director of its research centre for advanced science and technology, and director of information technology. During his tenure at the OUJ, Prof. Okabe steered the judicious and learner-friendly mix of the old broadcasting system and the learner centre system with the upcoming technologies of 21st century; and this foundational work led to the creation of a centre for ICT and DE in 2007, the launch of nation-wide digital broadcasting through broadcast satellite in 2011, the establishment of a centre

for open distance education in place of ICT and DE, and finally full online programmes in 2015. Commenting on MOOCs, Prof. Okabe remarked that the U-Air and OUJ had produced more than 300 high quality video lectures, which are comprehensive in subject coverage and are available in open domain, and therefore are equivalent to MOOCs. In 2005 the Japan Open CourseWare Alliance (JOCW) was launched in cooperation with MIT, and subsequently this took the shape of Open CourseWare Consortium (OCWC) with the larger involvement of universities and colleges, especially from the private sector.

I must also note the significant contributions made by Prof. Takashi Sakamoto and Prof. Hiromitsu Muta to the policy and practice of distance education in Japan.

Malaysia

Gajaraj Dhanarajan

Tan Sri Prof. Gajaraj Dhanarajan is one of the leading pioneers of distance education in Asia and, indeed, the world. With a BSc and MSc from University of Madras, DIC and MSc from University London, and PhD in Biology from University of Aston, Prof. Dhanarajan has been subsequently conferred honorary degrees (*honoris causa*) from a dozen universities around the world.

He started his career as a faculty member at University Sains Malaysia, associate professor of distance education, and deputy director of its centre for off-campus studies. Subsequently Dr. Dhanarajan was invited by the government of Hong Kong to establish the Open Learning Institute (later renamed as Open University Hong Kong) as associate director, and became its director for five years in 1991. Raj establishes leadership by setting examples; and one of those was making the OLI self-sustaining, with negligible public funding but with a very high public reputation worldwide. An expert in strategic planning and educational leadership, he established a number of institutions including the Wawasan Open University in Malaysia as its founding vice chancellor and CEO. In 1994, the Malaysian state of Penang conferred on him the Order of Chivalry (conveying the title of Dato), and in 1995 the OUHK conferred on him an emeritus professorship. He received the highest Malaysian civilian award, which carries the title of Tan Sri.

The most significant contribution of Prof. Dhanarajan was to raise the reputation of open distance learning as the second president and CEO of COL, contributing significantly through capacity building and establishing distance education systems in many developing countries. One of his significant contributions has also been improving the standard of research in open distance learning, which was neglected for quite some time. In 1997, he received the first AAOU meritorious services award in recognition of his outstanding contribution to ODL in Asia.

Tan Sri Prof. Dhanarajan was conferred Honorary Fellow of COL in 2006 and received the 2013 ICDE Prize for Lifelong Contribution to open distance education.

Anuwar Ali

Tan Sri Prof Anuwar Ali championed lifelong learning and the democratisation of higher education through the Open University of Malaysia (OUM) as its president. Under his leadership, the university greatly increased its student enrolment and graduate numbers. Learners could attend tutorials close to their homes or workplaces, thereby allowing OUM to live up to its motto of “University for All”. Another major achievement under Prof Anuwar’s leadership was the university’s close involvement

in the efforts of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to upgrade school teachers to graduate status. OUM provided in-service Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Teaching programmes, specially designed in close collaboration with the Teacher Training Division of MOE.

Prof. Ali introduced the Flexible Entry System in 2006, which allowed the university to admit learners based on prior learning. By giving credit to related work experience, OUM paved the way for the implementation of Recognition for Prior Learning in Malaysia. Other universities, with permission to implement this system, use the university's model as a basis. In breaking barriers, OUM has a special collaboration with prison authorities to offer its programmes to inmates. At the international level, he has been a strong advocate of meaningful collaborations with other educational institutions.

Although his tenure as President/Vice-Chancellor ended in 2015, Prof. Ali continues to lend a guiding hand to OUM as its senior advisor, promoting OUM programmes at the national and international levels. Prof Ali was conferred Honorary Fellow of COL.

Pakistan

The Late Wali Muhammad Zakia

Prof Wali Muhammad Zakia, the founder of AIOU, was the architect of the first-ever distance-level education institution in Asia. Dr. Zaki remained the AIOU's vice chancellor twice from 1973 to 1975 and from 1990 to 1992. He was the first Pakistani who was awarded PhD by Harvard University, USA in 1961. He received training in teacher education, educational planning, administration and management from USA, France and Lebanon. In addition, Dr Zaki served as secretary of National Education Commission (NEC), National Book Foundation (NBP), UNESCO, Ministry of Education and University of the Punjab.

He made an outstanding contribution in establishing the Open University on a sound footing. It is because of him that today the university has turned into the most viable institution for promoting distance education in the country, with 1.3 million students and 44 regional offices across the country. He also had the distinction of serving abroad — as advisor/consultant in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Nepal — as the representative of UNESCO.

Naveed A Malik

Prof. Naveed Akhtar Malik is the founding Rector of Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP). Dr. Malik obtained his Doctor of Science degree from MIT in the field of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, specialising in Digital Signal Processing. At the University of the Punjab, Pakistan, he established the Spark Source Mass Spectroscopy and later became the founding chairman of the Department of Computer Science. He was appointed as the Rector of VUP in 2001. He is a life member of the Pakistan Institute of Physics and was awarded the Pakistan Civil Award of Sitara-e-Imtiaz in 2008 for services to education. He was conferred the title of Honorary Fellow by the Commonwealth of Learning in 2016.

In his position as Rector and Project Director of the Virtual University project, Dr. Malik was instrumental in spearheading the design, development and implementation of the university. By utilising the services of the best professors in the country and having them develop world-class courses, which were then delivered through broadcast television, the Virtual University was able to overcome several challenges simultaneously: distance education no longer remained a “nameless,

faceless” method of education. Having been a prolific systems and software developer himself, Dr. Malik was able to effectively combine these skills with his academic background to lead the development of the university’s Learning Management System (LMS), as well as all its institutional management systems. Of particular note is the Virtual University’s examination system that allows students to create their own individual examination schedules within the dates provided by the Controller of Examinations.

From 2005-2012, the University led two Asia-wide research projects on distance education, funded by the International Development and Research Center, Canada, and Dr. Malik was the Project Coordinator for both projects. The first project titled “PAN-DLT (Asia): Networking Distance Learning Technology Engines for Research” (PANdora) looked at the state of distance learning technologies in Asia and how they could be leveraged as engines of growth, especially in the underdeveloped countries of the region. The second project “Openness and Quality in Asian Distance Education” with a self-explanatory title was managed by a governing board, comprising Professor Tian Belawati, Professor Insung Jung and Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, with Professor Malik as the head of the Board. Both projects resulted in a body of published work that gave new insights into distance education practices in the region and were able to provide sound policy guidelines to several countries.

Peoples’ Republic of China

It has been difficult to get access to and obtain information on Chinese leaders in distance education. A few of them, who could not be contacted, include: Prof. Zhang Deming, Prof. Xingfu Ding, Dr. Wang Yibing, Dr. Weiyuan Zhang, and of course Prof. Yang Zhijian, the current vice chancellor of Open University of China which has above 3.59 million registered students.

Chen Li

Prof. Li Chen is currently vice president of Beijing Normal University. She has been director of National Lab of Intelligent Technology for Online Education, and executive dean of Beijing Institution for Lifelong Society. Li has been working in distance education for over 25 years. She initiated the Master’s programme and the PhD programme of distance education in China. Li has been working on the research fields of interaction theory and interactive media, and quality assurance of distance education.

Li Chen has been involved in many international collaborative projects, such as Strengthening Capacity in Basic Education in Western China 2006, Quality Assurance (QA) Models, Standards and Key Performance Indicators for ICT-supported Distance Education (DE) in Asia, and PANdora. She has wide and close international collaborative relationships. The author of this article is proud to have worked closely and published with her while as a visiting professor twice at the Beijing Normal University.

Philippines

Felix Librero

The Open University in the Philippines is part of the University of Philippines, though it is fully autonomous, and named as University of Philippines Open University (UPOU). Prof. Felix Librero, who retired from the UPOU in 2013 to be a professor emeritus, had a doctorate in instructional

systems technology, was for six years the chancellor of UPOU and also the faculty regent for a year. He was a leader in the PANdora project of IDRC covering the entire Asian region, and was chief editor of *Digital Review of Asia Pacific*. Felix has contributed significantly to distance education in the Philippines and the Asian countries. His work can be judged from the definition of an emeritus professor given by the UPOU as: 'an ideal academic, a true scholar and a master of his field shown by productive service, marked distinction and an infectious and untiring zeal to convince and help others attain academic excellence'. He also contributed through heading the development communication unit, working through its radio station and school-on-the-air, as dean of school of distance education, and as president of Philippine Society for Distance Learning.

South Korea

Insung Jung

Prof. Insung Jung has been a professor of education at the International Christian University (ICU) in Japan since 2003. Before joining ICU, she served as the Director of the Multimedia Education Center at the Ewha Womans University in South Korea. The Center was established to develop, deliver and manage e-learning programs for the university. She established numerous collaborative relationships with national, regional and international institutions to develop and deliver online programs to professional women in the region and throughout the world. Some of those programs include: online courses on Korean studies and Women's studies. Between 1991 and 2000, she was a faculty member at the Korea National Open University (Korea's premier distance teaching institution) and conducted several research projects on the design, development and evaluation of various technology-enhanced types of education.

Prof. Jung has contributed so much to the scholarly knowledge base of ODeL through her over 150 publications and numerous talks. She has also provided service to the profession through her leadership in various organisations. She has served as a director and an advisor to the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (ibstpi), and sits on the editorial board of many refereed international journals on distance education and online learning. She served on the executive board of the International Development Research Centre-sponsored *Openness and Quality in DE in Asia* project. Moreover, she has been involved in Korea's national policy development in ODeL including a recent ASEAN Cyber University project.

Sri Lanka

Chandra Gunawardena

Prof. Gunawardena joined the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) as professor of education. She had served for 21 years as an academic in a conventional university and her colleagues' efforts to dissuade her did not deter her from joining OUSL as a career. The OUSL conferred an honorary doctorate, Doctor of Letters, on her and made her an emeritus professor. She still works as Emeritus Professor of Education at the OUSL.

Her major contributions have been in the area of ODL practice where she could help enhance the quality of the programmes of study by making them interactive and student-centered, especially the Master of Teacher Education programme developed by the Open University together with consultants from India and Australia, which is scenario-based and the first of its kind in Sri Lanka.

Her own personal contribution to distance education research is very significant. She participated in most distance education research conferences and also presented a positive image of the OUSL at various international fora and such. After retirement she was appointed as the Team Leader of the Distance Education Programme of the Asian Development Bank, where she worked with more than twenty higher education institutions, training and guiding the academic staff to develop on-line programmes. She contributed, as a consultant, in training academics in Asian, African, Central American and Pacific countries on multi-grade education, at the request of the Commonwealth of Learning and Child-Friendly Schools at the request of the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.

Uma Coomaraswamy

Prof. Uma Coomaraswamy, former vice chancellor of Open University of Sri Lanka is a distinguished fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning, and has contributed significantly to ODL in Sri Lanka, South Asia, and the Commonwealth. Cool, persuasive, determined and, at times, demanding, she has strengthened DE not only in Sri Lanka and South Asia but also globally, promoting the cause of deserved but neglected Third World countries. In 2009, she developed the concept paper for the National Accreditation and Assessment Council for Higher Education, Sri Lankan Ministry of Higher Education, which led to the establishment of such a system in the country. Prof. Coomaraswamy was conferred Honorary Fellow of COL.

Charlotte 'Lani' Gunawardena

Born in Sri Lanka, Prof. Gunawardena is currently a distinguished professor of distance education and instructional technology at the College of University Libraries and Learning Sciences, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, USA. She has been a Fulbright scholar working in Morocco and Sri Lanka. She has extensively worked on culture and distance/ online learning; social technologies, online learning, and socially-mediated meta-cognition; social presence theory; social context of digital learning, and social construction of knowledge in online learning communities. She has extensively consulted internationally: the prestigious Star Project for the US Department of Education, National American Research Centre for Health, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and in many other projects, countries and agencies. She served on the Army Education Advisory Committee appointed by the US Secretary of Defense. She won the prestigious Charles A. Wedemyer Award in DE; and has been consistent in leading and facilitating aspiring but talented and committed young scholars in distance education, online learning, and instructional technology, and mentoring them and the cause of DE for over three decades. She has also occasionally contributed to distance learning in the Asian region, especially India and Sri Lanka. She is one of the few scholars of DE research in the world who have enhanced the standard of research in DE (which generally has not been viewed highly by mainstream researchers) and also that of DE for the next generation to engage with.

Thailand

Whichit Srisa-an

One of the legends of global distance education, who built institutions and developed leaders for them, is Prof Whichit Srisa-an, who is the founder and founding president of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), created through a royal charter in 1978 as the first open university in South-East Asia. Known as the father of distance education in Thailand, he held Master's and Doctoral degrees in educational administration from the University of Minnesota, USA.

As both a civil servant and an educationist, he has also been permanent secretary, Thailand Ministry of University Affairs, and had been rector of five universities. As a senator, member of parliament, and a minister of education, he significantly steered higher education reforms in the country, especially open distance education through STOU. In recognition of his scholarly and able leadership, the Wawasan Open University conferred on him honorary DLitt 'in recognition of a lifelong career dedicated to the development of education for the betterment of people'.

Conclusion

The Asian countries have shown tremendous growth in distance education and e-learning in the past decades, with the largest regional enrolment and highest number of open universities and dual-mode distance education institutions in the world. As Sir John Daniel noted, Asia has seven out of 11 mega universities in the world (Daniel, 1996). While analyzing the developments in distance education in the developing countries, Perraton (2000) noted ideological, economic, and technological reasons why DE has expanded globally and, more importantly, in the Asian continent. The distance education programmes have significantly served the respective national development needs, and have also attracted international students under what is known today as Mode 1 of GATS—cross-border delivery. These countries have shown tremendous progress in the adoption and adaptation of new media and technologies, OERs and MOOCs, some of the country-specific developments being unique to this region. As Latchem and Jung (2010) remind us, the ODL and ICT developments in the region must respect their own unique contexts and values. However, access and equity, along with quality and parity of esteem, still remain as public issues to be addressed, though many countries have shown significant employability trends to offset the unfounded public perception. The contributions made by the above distance education leaders have resulted in very vibrant distance education systems and practices in the Asian region. The current distance education administrators and policy makers are working hard toward harnessing the potential of ICT and social technologies and networks, and also balancing access with employability and contribution to national human resource development needs. These are also the areas where the Asian system is poised to show unique pathways to the entire globe.

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