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**EXPANDING HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES VIA
INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION:
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA APPROACH**

**Professor Emeritus Anuwar Ali
President/Vice-Chancellor
Open University Malaysia**

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Abstract

The concept that education can cross borders is inherently linked to open and distance learning (ODL). Its very foundation is borne out of the necessity to expand educational access and opportunities, which in this 21st Century is an increasingly crucial issue, especially in facing global challenges, boosting economic progress and keeping abreast with rapid expansion in information and communication technology (ICT). The importance of higher education in contributing to economic development is universally acknowledged, and is all the more significant for developing countries like Cambodia and Malaysia. The relevance of ODL lies in the reality that the limited resources and facilities of traditional higher education providers have rendered them unable to cope with today's growing demands. However, the unique ODL approach has proven to be a feasible way for a more accessible, affordable and flexible means for a greater number of people to attain higher education. The ODL scene in Asia is fast evolving, with a number of established and prominent open universities in Indonesia, Thailand, India, China and other countries. This indicates ODL's great potential in contributing to economic development by meeting relevant national needs. Furthermore, the open nature of ODL has also paved the way to international collaboration, where learning opportunities are open to every individual, regardless of location or nationality. This paper will consider the idea of education across borders and discuss international collaboration as a means to expand higher education. From the perspective of Open University Malaysia (OUM), this paper will also discuss how the ODL approach can play a pivotal role in advancing the very concept of partnerships in higher education. Finally, this paper will also briefly explore potential opportunities in creating collaborative higher education links between Cambodia and Malaysia.

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1. INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION ACROSS BORDERS

Building national capacities for economic development is a universal concern in many countries; involving a focus on capacities that can correspond to rapid advancements in a globalised and borderless world. Central to this imperative are capacities that concern higher education. In recent decades, economic, political and social influences have transformed higher education from traditional, exclusive and elitist to something more accessible, open, flexible and democratised. This involves the participation of new, non-traditional providers and learners, including open and distance learning (ODL), which has seen marked progress, awareness and acceptance across the globe, especially in line with swift developments in information and communication technology (ICT).

In responding to current global challenges and discovering new solutions for modern national needs, one of the most common strategies involves increasing higher education enrolment as a way to improve the knowledge and skills capacity of the people. However, this alone is insufficient, as the existing workforce, especially in developing regions like Asia, is not highly skilled, and opportunities for training and skills upgrading within existing industries are often lacking. Due to the limited facilities and resources of traditional higher education providers, many countries are also unable to cater to the growing demand for places in conventional universities. These current issues have led to low productivity as a whole, from which a nation's entire economy can suffer.

Nevertheless, this globalised and borderless world has paved the way for new opportunities to collaborate in the efforts of expanding higher education, whether locally or abroad. International collaboration can help to create a worldwide brand and bring global recognition for an educational institution, while also providing a platform for mutual sharing and exchange; where academic programmes can be conducted, improved upon, modified and enhanced with local content and nuances while creating prospects for reciprocal benefits. Put simply, the programmes offered by one institution in a particular country can now be offered and taught by another institution in a different corner of the globe; an arrangement that is made even more

feasible through the flexible ODL approach that leverages on online learning, web-based platforms and various ICT innovations.

This concept of education provision across borders is firmly linked to ODL. The fundamental building blocks of ODL owe to the idea that education should be democratised and learning opportunities accessible to anyone who seeks it. In fact, the very concept of distance education was founded on the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining as well as the technologies that make it possible to teach and learn at a distance (Daniel, 2002).

The uptake and establishment of ODL has steadily progressed worldwide, with many Asian open universities proving to be key contributors and players since as early as the 1970s. Today, Asia is home to many of the world's prominent open universities that have allowed an unprecedented number of people, many who are considered non-traditional learners, to gain access to higher education and obtain university degrees. In both developed countries and less affluent nations alike, these individuals have diverse backgrounds – a majority are working adults, some are teachers, civil servants, including a notable number of senior citizens, remote and marginalised groups. Many have enrolled into academic programmes as they seek personal satisfaction and professional advancement.

Having enrolled more than 100,000 learners, many of the Asian open universities have also achieved 'mega university' status. These include Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka (UT), India's Indira Gandhi National Open University, Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and Ramkhamhaeng University, Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University as well as Bangladesh Open University. Within the last few decades, the growing influence of ODL institutions has been clearly reflected in the change of the demographics of general university-goers from fresh school-leavers in post-secondary enrolment to working adults who often seek a second chance at obtaining higher degrees.

At this juncture, where much has already been achieved in ODL, the imperative is to truly realise education without borders, where an even greater number of people, regardless of background or location, can have access to learning opportunities. In this regard, there are excellent reasons for institutions in developing countries like Cambodia and Malaysia to consider collaborative linkages. Socio-economic similarities in a culturally tight-knit region like Asia, as well as common issues in higher education and economic development point to a possibility where forging partnerships is more practicable, as we often share the same educational goals and values as well. Through ODL and international collaboration, developing countries can certainly explore a solution that can transform higher education and help all of us survive the demands of the 21st Century.

2. ADVANTAGES OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND THE ODL PERSPECTIVE

Collaboration between higher education institutions is not a nascent phenomenon. Practised in many countries and through many approaches, it has led to new forms of study arrangements, e.g. twinning programmes, establishment of branch campuses and franchising agreements, as well as more stringent regulatory and quality assurance (QA) measures at regional or even global levels. The increasing use of online delivery has provided a fresh perspective as well, where there is now an alternative pathway to complement environments where local higher education capacities have been found inadequate.

Some of the most significant benefits that result from international collaboration in the context of higher education include:

- Access to courses and programmes that are unavailable or inadequate in learners' home countries;
- Improved research and development as well as quality of faculty, teaching and learning;
- Improved opportunity for mobility (either of programmes, learners, or faculty members);
- Improved opportunity to participate in international networks;
- Better engagement with stakeholders and similar institutions for national, regional and global issues; and
- Opportunity for sharing and exchange of expertise for institutional improvement in various areas, e.g. policies, governance and support services.

The discussion concerning quality is especially substantial in the context of international collaboration through ODL. Collaborations create opportunities for benchmarking and sharing of best practices, and this is encouraged further by international and regional bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and ASEAN QA Network (AQAN). ODL providers have given specific attention to quality as well, often from a regional perspective, such as the QA Framework disseminated through the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). In recent years, QA in ODL has shifted from a provider- to learner-centred focus that lends various themes such as staff performance evaluation and foreign accreditation (Jung, 2007). This illustrates the growing focus on learner services as indication for overall quality, and many open universities are already looking to improve these features through ICT.

This relates to learner-centredness as an important philosophy in ODL. A learner-friendly delivery method that often employs a blended pedagogy and focuses on e-learning as the central component in teaching and learning has made it possible for a greater fraction of the community to enrol in academic programmes. An e-learning platform allows virtually limitless room for innovation that can further promote the democratisation of higher education. In the context of global partnerships, many open universities have proven that ODL academic programmes can be run internationally with tuition fees, curricula and delivery approaches that can be adjusted to suit local conditions.

Leveraging on ICT is almost always considered an integral part of any ODL delivery, as it is through technology that ODL institutions often share expertise and exchange information, in addition to actual teaching and learning practices. In the ODL sphere, through the use of learning management systems, electronic learning materials and online-based assessment, ICT also allows collaborations to take place without involving extensive physical mobility, relying instead on available local expertise, infrastructure and manpower. Through the use of ICT, one of the best mechanisms where collaborations can be forged is for one institution to work with a local partner in the home country. As will be illustrated in the next section, Open University Malaysia (OUM) has explored this strategy for several years and has made considerable strides in this endeavour.

3. OUM'S APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Established in 2001, OUM started with only 753 learners. 13 years later, we have a cumulative enrolment surpassing 130,000. More than 55,000 of our learners have successfully graduated and there are 37 learning centres nationwide. As Malaysia's premier open university, OUM has been able to stamp its mark in Malaysia and globally in a short span of time. We believe that further growth of OUM and ODL lies not only within Malaysia, but there is much to gain from international partnerships as well.

OUM's approach to collaboration essentially involves foreign higher education institutions that operate as OUM's overseas learning centres. While the partner institution is free to enrol learners into OUM academic programmes and conduct all teaching, learning and administrative activities, we provide learning materials, set assessment questions, as well as endorse marking schemes, examination results and teaching staff. This has proven to be a suitable arrangement for both parties as OUM does not interfere with regular day-to-day operations, instead according sufficient autonomy although giving regular attention to QA by monitoring the relevant processes. OUM also gives technological support, usually in the form of subscription

to OUM's learning management system (known as myVLE or My Virtual Learning Environment) and the provision of electronic learning materials.

Over the past nine years, OUM has forged partnerships with numerous foreign educational institutions across different regions. The total number of learners to date has exceeded 7,000, while more than 1,000 have successfully graduated from their programmes.

OUM's international collaborations are based on mutual benefits, where, apart from the offering of academic programmes, both parties gain from:

- The sharing of ICT facilities;
- Cooperation in curriculum development;
- The training and exchange of academic staff;
- Collaboration in research activities and publications; and
- The sharing of learning materials and support services.

The following table illustrates OUM's partners and cumulative numbers of international learners and graduates as at April 2014.

Table 1: Cumulative Enrolment and Graduates of OUM International Learners by Institution

INSTITUTION	LEARNERS	GRADUATES
Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana	1,100	108
Arab Open University, Bahrain	641	335
Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary	31	-
Graduate School of Management, Sri Lanka	66	-
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam	1,228	386
IDM Group of Companies, Sri Lanka	32	-
International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka	195	20
Mogadishu University, Somalia	53	-
NIEC School of Business Management Trust, Zambia	36	-
SIMAD University, Somalia	170	-
University of Science and Technology, Yemen	1,019	102
Villa College, The Maldives	2,831	313
GRAND TOTAL	7,410	1,264

In addition to formal academic programmes offered through its international partners, OUM's internationalisation initiatives also include the following:

- **Short-term training programmes:**

These programmes are managed by the University's international arm (designated OUM International). They include seminars, workshops, general training, certificate and diploma programmes for executives and professionals in various fields, including management, language and socio-cultural exposure, and strategic planning. Some of OUM International's clients include higher education institutions, government agencies and various government-linked organisations in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East.

- **Short-term academic programmes:**

Managed by the Institute of Professional Development and School of Lifelong Learning (IPD-SoLL), these programmes include career certificate programmes and executive diploma, degree and Master's programmes in a wide range of subject matters. IPD-SoLL has collaborated with public universities, research institutions, training providers and experts from various countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Laos, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Yemen.

- **Joint offering of the Master of ASEAN Studies programme:**

This is an effort between OUM, UT (Indonesia), University of The Philippines Open University (UPOU, The Philippines), Hanoi Open University (HOU, Vietnam) and STOU (Thailand) that was launched in October 2011.

The Master of ASEAN Studies programme is a true collaboration as it involves joint curriculum development, shared learning materials, resources and platforms. All five institutions contribute to the development of the learning modules, which are shared and translated for consumption in each participating university.

- **Joint publication of the ASEAN Journal of ODL:**

This is a joint publication between OUM, STOU and UPOU. Launched in 2009, the journal is currently managed by UPOU.

- **Bilateral partnership with STOU:**

OUM has had a longstanding relationship with STOU; one of Thailand's esteemed open universities. This is reflected in joint research initiatives in learner retention, content development, faculty and learner exchange as well as research and publication in fields of common interest.

While we have given extensive focus on building our presence overseas, these initiatives represent a holistic perspective on the many possibilities of international collaboration. The

success that we have had for the past nine years can be attributed to the continuous efforts made by OUM as well as all our partners. We have been fortunate to have collaborated with institutions of excellent standing that share our values and are able to synergise with us to provide the best possible services to all our learners. This demonstrates how international collaboration can expand avenues for higher education and truly realise learning opportunities for all.

5. POTENTIAL CAMBODIAN-MALAYSIAN COLLABORATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In a recent article, Wilson (2013) describes the Cambodian education system to be "*in need of immediate and serious attention*". Like many developing countries in Asia, Cambodia struggles with limited education expenditure, lack of resources, facilities and qualified teaching staff, academia-industry discord as well as quality and accreditation issues. Coupled with the many years of civil war and political turmoil that Cambodia has had to endure, it is unsurprising to note that the ODL concept is still relatively new in this country.

However, within the last two decades, the world has seen Cambodia rise from her bleak past, where national progress and reforms include developments in higher education, e.g. growing numbers of private institutions, increasing enrolment numbers (see UNESCO Bangkok, n.d.) as well as involvement from global bodies like UNESCO and the World Bank in studies that focus on higher education reforms in the country (Times Higher Education, 1999). These are laudable instances that prove that much like the rest of the developing world, Cambodia is aware of the important role higher education plays in the context of the current global environment.

With specific regard to ODL, the very first e-learning project to be implemented was only recently introduced in 2007 through an American-Cambodian effort that focused on providing business education (see Abdon, Ninomiya, & Raab, 2007). An ambitious pilot project involving some 300 learners, this project proved that the ODL approach has serious potential in this country, in spite of the limited technology available in Cambodia.

And it is projects like these that demonstrate the possibility of creating a tangible link between Malaysian higher education institutions like OUM and our Cambodian counterparts. Although there are no dedicated open universities currently available in Cambodia, the international collaborations OUM has already successfully implemented with other partners, in Asia or other regions, indicate the possibilities that both countries can consider. In addition to the abovementioned pilot project, other initiatives that have been introduced in recent years, e.g.

the Open School programme, as well as those by the World Bank and Canada's International Development Research Centre, show a growing collective interest to introduce e-learning technology not only to improve the quality of education, but also to increase access to learning opportunities and to produce graduates who are better prepared for the current working environment.

Despite Cambodia's modest ICT capacity, the project described by Abdon, Ninomiya & Raab (*ibid.*) shows that e-learning can be a powerful approach to expand learning opportunities in the country, especially for provincial learners and working adults. The blended pedagogy, an approach that leverages on online technology while still allocating considerable face-to-face and independent learning components, already a common approach used by many open universities including OUM, can help to encourage ODL uptake in Cambodia. Cost-effective measures, such as the use of freely available learning materials like open educational resources (OER), can also help to make ODL programmes more affordable. At this juncture, it is inevitable to note that the efforts made by the Cambodian government to develop the local ICT infrastructure and education system will be crucial for ODL to really take shape in Cambodia. The developments already seen in other countries with similar challenges and environments, and together with the involvement of various internal and external parties, prove that this is indeed a realistic and attainable aspiration.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The value of higher education for economic development is universally acknowledged, leading to a growing demand for learning opportunities in areas considered relevant and necessary for today's career landscape. In many countries, whether in Asia or other regions, ODL has proven to be a viable alternative avenue to widen access to higher education, especially where traditional facilities and resources are limited. The concept of international collaboration through ODL has boosted the efforts to democratise higher education even across borders, where OUM is one of the many of the world's open universities that has proven its feasibility in further expanding learning opportunities to an international audience.

Over our nine years in forging international partnerships, OUM has enrolled more than 7,000 international learners in 12 partnering institutions worldwide. Many of our partners encounter similar issues and challenges in higher education as other developing regions, but all have benefited from the ODL approach, especially in introducing novel pathways for their local learners to obtain industry-relevant degrees and higher qualifications. This indicates the

serious potential ODL has to offer in further expanding higher education opportunities to the masses, particularly to a similarly developing country like Cambodia.

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