

**THE 2<sup>ND</sup> ACDE CONFERENCE AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY:  
OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:  
THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXPERIENCE**

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# **OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXPERIENCE**

## **Abstract**

*In the light of ever-changing social and economic demands, education is now perceived as a critical force in contributing towards human capital development. In Southeast Asia, the ever increasing demand for higher education, coupled with numerous educational reforms in a number of countries, has resulted in the establishment of several open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. Through ODL, higher education in Southeast Asia is expected to experience new advancements with the collective aim of increasing the capacity for human capital development. This paper provides a snapshot of the Southeast Asian economic scenario, and how higher education and ODL will shape and influence the region's ability to compete at a global level. The paper also discusses the prospects of a South-South collaboration between Southeast Asian and African ODL institutions.*

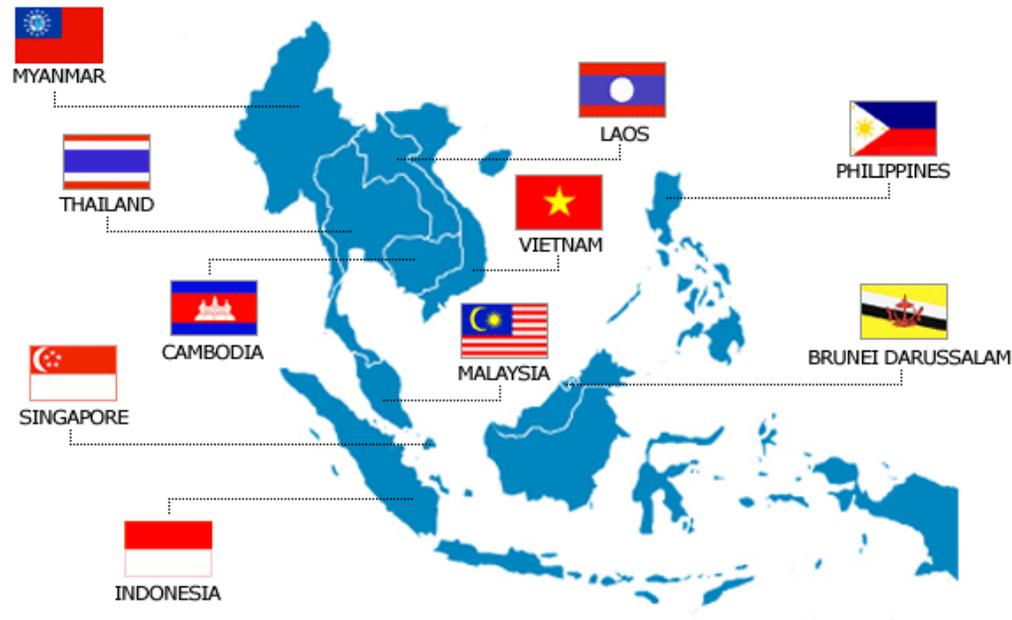
## **INTRODUCTION**

It is indeed a great pleasure and honour for me to be given the opportunity to be a lead speaker at this august conference. Let me therefore thank the organisers, especially Professor Olugbemi Jegede, the Vice Chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria for making this possible. The topic I am to discuss today is “Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development: the Southeast Asian Experience.” I will present an overview of the role of open and distance learning or ODL institutions in enhancing the economic development of the ten nations that make up the Southeast Asian Region.

I would like to begin by citing the three pillars of human development as proposed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). These are economic growth, social development and environmental protection. Among the rights and privileges safeguarded under the UN and UNDP specifically, such as peace, poverty alleviation and cultural diversity, these three pillars also encompass education as a means of forging and bolstering economic progress in the era of globalisation. At this point in time, we all know that ODL institutions have made great strides in contributing towards regional and global human capital development. Education, the hallmark of a nation’s progress and prosperity, when given the right focus and appropriate policies by the government, will certainly alleviate poverty and uplift the quality of life in any given society. In this context, we certainly believe that ODL has a very significant role to play in reaching to the masses.

## I. THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGION

Southeast Asia (SEA) consists of ten countries as reflected by the member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.



**Figure 1: The Ten Southeast Asian Countries**

With a total land area of almost 4.5 million square kilometres or 3.3% of the total world land area, SEA has a combined population of 565 million or 8.6% of the world's population. In terms of output, the combined gross domestic product (GDP), at current prices of the Southeast Asian countries in 2006 is almost USD1.1 trillion or 2.2% of the world's total (Table 1). Except for Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, which are categorised as developed economies (based on their respective GDPs per capita), the rest of the countries in the region are considered developing nations. Notwithstanding that, one of the distinguishing characteristics of this region is its fast growing economies. In 2006, the growth rate in GDP at constant prices ranged from 5.1% (Brunei Darussalam) to 10.8% (Cambodia), giving an average regional growth rate of 6.0% (Table 1).

**Table 1: Gross Domestic Product by Country**

Country	Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2006	
	USD in million	Growth Rate (%)
Brunei Darussalam	11,551.0	5.1
Cambodia	7,256.5	10.8
Indonesia	364,400.1	5.5
Laos	3,521.8	8.3
Malaysia	156,924.2	5.9
Myanmar	11,950.3	7.0
The Philippines	118,083.0	5.3
Singapore	132,273.4	7.9
Thailand	206,645.1	5.0
Vietnam	60,965.2	8.2
<b>Combined value in SEA (USD in million)</b>	<b>1,073,570.5 (2.2% of world total)</b>	
<b>Average value in SEA (%)</b>		<b>6.0</b>
<b>Combined value in World (USD in million)</b>	<b>48,244,879.0</b>	

Sources:

*Selected basic ASEAN indicators, as of 25 February 2008;*

*Selected key ASEAN macroeconomic indicators, as of 25 February 2008; and*

*World Development Indicators database, World Bank, as of 1 July 2007.*

As indicated earlier, one of the pillars of socio-economic development of any region is its human capital development. Closely related with this is the development of higher education and its perceived role in the overall development of a nation. Higher education as we know it is critical in providing the necessary human intellectual input to transform a nation or region into a knowledge-based and innovation-led society. In this regard, the Southeast Asian region is no exception. In 2006, the region spent 3.5% of its combined GDP on education (Table 2).

Despite the diversity in higher education systems across the region, almost all Southeast Asian countries face similar constraints and challenges. Higher education in these countries generally continues to be under-funded despite escalating demand for access as the result of expanding youth population and rising expectations. The quality of university education and graduate unemployment have also become important issues in a number of countries. A decade after the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the higher education sector in SEA is still experiencing reforms in the areas of state funding, private sector involvement, academic leadership, governance and curriculum development. We can only hope that these restructuring efforts will be geared towards a higher level of human capital development to be harnessed within a sustainable and equitable framework.

**Table 2: GDP Expenditure on Education by Country in 2006**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Education Budget (USD in million)</b>	<b>Percent of GDP (%)</b>
Brunei Darussalam	346.8	5.9
Cambodia	110.5	2.5
Indonesia	418.0	1.3
Laos	69.9	2.5
Malaysia	7,088.4	5.4
Myanmar	97.0	1.3
The Philippines	2,203.4	2.4
Singapore	4,553.7	3.9
Thailand	6,423.7	3.9
Vietnam	2,602.0	5.9
<b>Average value</b>	<b>2,391.3</b>	<b>3.5</b>

*Source:*

*Southeast Asian Education Data, SEAMEO, as of 26 March 2007.*

### **III. HIGHER EDUCATION AND ODL IN SEA**

Although highly diverse in history, politics, culture and socio-economic development, SEA countries nevertheless share a common aspiration insofar as education and human capital development are concerned. It is only in the past several decades, and after obtaining Independence, that Southeast Asian countries have witnessed a rapid expansion of higher education (Lee, 2006). Each country in the region is actively reforming its higher education system to expedite its own respective economic development. And the good news for us is that many countries have targeted ODL as an important instrument to achieve this goal.

Thailand was the very first nation to establish an open admissions university, Ramkhamhaeng University, in 1971 (Jung and Latchem, 2007). Since mid 1980s, ODL institutions in the region have grown in numbers and stature, some of which have attained “mega university” status as indicated in Table 3. Asian countries now boast the highest number of ODL institutions and learners than any other region in the world (Jung and Latchem, 2007).

**Table 3: Open Universities in Southeast Asia by Country**

Country	Open University	Year of Establishment	Learner Population
Indonesia	Universitas Terbuka Indonesia	1984	400,000 (1)
Malaysia	1. Open University Malaysia 2. Wawasan Open University	2000 2007	67,000 (2) 2,000 (3)
Myanmar	University of Distance Education	1992	200,000 (4)
Philippines	The University of Philippines Open University	1995	n/a (5)
Thailand	1. Ramkhamhaeng University 2. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University	1971 1978	600,000 (6) 192,000 (7)
Vietnam	1. Ho Chi Minh City Open University 2. Hanoi Open University	1993 1993	10,500 (8) 46,000 (9)

(1) 2007; (2) 2008; (3) 2008 (Estimated); (4) 1998-99; (5) n/a; (6) 2007; (7) 2007; (8) 2006; (9) 2007

The evolution of ODL in the region varies; based on the domestic conditions of each country, such as geography, size, demography, economic development and national policies on higher education. I shall now look into several aspects of ODL approaches in SEA, i.e. operating models; pedagogy and modes of delivery; technologies for ODL; academic-related matters; target groups; and quality assurance.

### 3.1 Operating Models

ODL institutions or open universities in SEA generally operate as public or private entities, though the involvement of the private sector is a relatively new phenomenon for countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam (Lee, 2006). The most pronounced difference between public and private education providers, including ODL-based, is in terms of governance and financial management. Public-owned institutions, such as the University of the Philippines Open University, Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka (UT), are established and operated with state funding. On the other hand, private institutions, such as OUM and Wawasan Open University in Malaysia, may receive initial federal grants and subsidies, but are otherwise self-sustaining in terms of revenue generation. Common trends in these private institutions include a preference for full-fee paying students, seeking research grants and consultancy, franchising programmes and also investing in other business ventures (cited in Lee, 2006). Tuition fees in private ODL institutions are generally higher than those of public institutions given that the latter are sufficiently subsidised.

In terms of governance and management, public universities operate under rules and regulations which are applicable to government departments or agencies. Hence, processes which relate to student admissions, delivery modes, research activities, accreditation and programme approval will be subject to the relevant Ministry's approval. However, under the prevailing changes in the higher education sector, some governments are accepting the need for greater empowerment for university management, while at the same time emphasising accountability.

### 3.2 Pedagogy and Modes of Delivery

Most ODL institutions in SEA use a combination of online learning, face-to-face tutorials and self-managed learning. However, the usage may vary significantly, depending on the levels of technology available in a particular country. A simple illustration of this fact is internet penetration. By the end of 2007, Malaysia and Singapore are in the lead at 60.0% and 53.2% respectively, whereas Indonesia and Myanmar were notably behind at 8.5% and 0.6% respectively (Table 4). Clearly, the internet and its complementing technologies are a key element in ODL. Where technology is lacking, the affected institutions will have little choice but to utilise other modes of learning. For instance, due to restricted internet access and usage in Indonesia, UT resorts to print materials as the main teaching and learning medium. Recorded and broadcasted materials are also higher on the list as compared to internet-based material. On the other hand, in Malaysia, where internet access is relatively better, OUM learners for instance rely mainly on the online learning aspect of its blended pedagogy.

**Table 4: Internet Penetration in Southeast Asia in 2007**

Country	Number of Users	Penetration (%)
Brunei Darussalam	176,029	47.0
Cambodia	44,000	0.3
Indonesia	20,000,000	8.5
Laos	25,000	0.4
Malaysia	14,904,000	60.0
Myanmar	300,000	0.6
The Philippines	14,000,000	15.4
Singapore	2,421,800	53.2
Thailand	8,465,800	13.0
Vietnam	18,226,701	21.4

*Source: Internet World Stats*

### 3.3 Technologies for ODL

As asserted by Louw and Engelbrecht (2006), the selection of information and communication technology (ICT) media for ODL is influenced by four indicators, i.e. cost, accessibility, pedagogy and ICT-related issues. Under these circumstances, the availability and use of the said technologies again vary in different Southeast Asian countries. Due to the expansive geography of the Indonesian archipelago, UT places high importance on the use of audio and video cassettes, radio and television programmes to deliver its content. As a comparison, STOU relies on textbooks and workbooks as its main media, and supplements these with radio, television and satellite programmes, computer-assisted learning, audio and video on demand, online learning and tutorials. Other technologies being used and explored in SEA also include audio and video conferencing (for synchronous communication) and mobile telephony (for asynchronous delivery).

An important technological component in ODL is the utilisation of a Learning Management System (LMS). OUM operates an internally-developed system called myLMS that serves as a virtual classroom allowing learners to download learning materials and participate in synchronous (i.e. chat) and asynchronous forums. E-testing is also another technological

application being explored. At UT, On-Line examination, as a form of e-testing, was first pilot tested in 2005 for seventy of its courses. Its use is expected to expand as UT has found that this form of assessment can be conducted without compromising the credibility and integrity of the examination process. E-testing has also been implemented at Ramkhamhaeng University (Jung, 2005).

### **3.4 Academic-related Matters**

The general academic components in different ODL institutions in Southeast Asia are also quite variable. To illustrate this, I shall offer an insight into the practices of UT and OUM.

UT, for example, currently offers nearly 900 courses from their five faculties. The number of credit hours per programme averages at approximately 140. The academic calendar is spread out over two yearly semesters, each lasting approximately 16 weeks. However, UT welcomes registration at any point in a particular year. Most other Southeast Asian ODL institutions also operate on a two-semester system. UT caters to an average of 250,000 students every semester, spread out over 37 learning centres throughout Indonesia as well as those outside the country. While tutorials are not compulsory, UT students have the freedom to choose from four types of tutorials; namely face-to-face tutorials, tutorials via radio, television and mass media, online tutorials and online counselling. In terms of assessment, UT students are graded based on their assignments and final examination results.

At OUM, 51 programmes are offered by five faculties and the Centre of Graduate Studies. OUM's academic year is spread out over three semesters, i.e. beginning in January, May and September. With a total enrolment of over 67,000, any given semester is made up of about 30,000 learners. OUM has 61 learning centres nationwide as well as three outside the country, i.e. in Yemen, Bahrain and Indonesia. The blended pedagogy practised at OUM applies to all programmes. All learners are required to participate in online learning, face-to-face tutorials that are held once every two weeks, and self-managed learning using the many different types of modules and learning materials. Learners are evaluated based on continuous assessment (online participation, tests, assignments and mid-term examinations) and final examinations.

Of course, there are other variations as well. For instance, Ramkhamhaeng University also operates on a two-semester system, but includes a non-compulsory summer session from April to May every year. Where in OUM there is an average requirement of three subjects per semester, Ramkhamhaeng University students have no minimum limit whatsoever. These differences clearly indicate that the operations of ODL institutions in SEA are influenced by common practices and local conditions in a particular country.

### **3.5 Target Groups**

Southeast Asian ODL institutions share a common objective which provides greater access to university education to working adults, senior citizens, the disabled and those who may not have had the opportunity to pursue such education due to various social or financial setbacks. ODL also offers a different, flexible avenue for those who wish to advance their personal lives and careers through higher education.

OUM's learner population is composed of 95% working adults. A significant portion of this includes teachers (almost 30,000 learners and about 44% of the cumulative intake). In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the number of in-service graduate teachers in the country is expected to increase by means of ODL. This is somewhat similar to UT, where 95% of its students are working adults and teachers as well (roughly 380,000 in total). 50% of the in-service teachers are sponsored by their employers, such as district and provincial governments, federal departments and educational foundations. Over 70% of OUM's learners are also sponsored, most by the abovementioned Ministry and including various foundations and banks.

In Cambodia, which still lacks an authentic open university, ODL first took shape in 1955 in the form of a teacher training programme, whereby over 47,000 primary school teachers were coached through distance education to strengthen their basic abilities and pedagogical knowledge. We can therefore infer that one of the main responsibilities of ODL institutions in SEA is providing tertiary education and training to in-service teachers. The professional development of teachers as direct frontliners in education is thus an integral effort in human capital development.

### **3.6 Quality Assurance**

Governance and quality assurance initiatives vary between countries, some with almost complete autonomy (e.g. the Philippines) whilst others are anchored to national frameworks (e.g. Malaysia). Some, such as in Indonesia, are unique in the sense that official regulation is applied to programmes offered, rather than the institutions themselves. Conversely, the more nascent ODL institutions in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have yet to see any governmental or institutional QA implementation (Lee, 2006; Jung and Latchem, 2007).

Given that ODL is a relatively new development in SEA, the quality of higher education through ODL is a major concern. Quality is managed and operated in one of three ways, i.e. through designated national or institutional policies; through collective systems with various boards or councils; or dispersed through various units (Jung and Latchem, 2007). Several countries have resorted to legislation to regulate the development of higher education systems and establish quality assurance frameworks, though countries like Brunei, Laos and Myanmar still do not have any quality control mechanisms (Lee, 2006).

In general, the following is a snapshot of quality assurance initiatives in Southeast Asian higher education:

**Table 5: Quality Assurance Bodies in Higher Education in SEA**

Country	Relevant Body(s)	Year of Establishment
Cambodia	The Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC)	2000
Indonesia	The National Accreditation Board of Higher Education (BAN-PT)	1994
Malaysia	The National Accreditation Board (LAN)	1996
The Philippines	1. The Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (AACCUP)	1989
	2. The Philippines Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU)	1957
Thailand	The National Educational Standards and Quality Assurance (NESQA)	2000
Vietnam	The Quality Assurance Unit	2002

*Cited in Lee, 2006.*

Some institutions, such as OUM and UT, have also gone beyond the national stage. This is evident in the form of obtaining certification from the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and other such bodies. At OUM, the Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Digital Library, Registry, the Centre for Instructional Design & Technology and the Centre for Student Management have all received the MS ISO 9001:2000 certification. UT has also sought the approval of the International Council for Open and Distance Education's Standards Agency (ISA) to ascertain its ODL provisions comply with existing international benchmarks.

#### **IV. EDUCATIONAL GLOBALISATION AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF ODL**

Globalisation has been referred as “the monumental structural changes occurring in the processes of production and distribution in the global economy”. At the same time, globalisation also “affects all of the social, political and economic structures and processes that emerge from this global restructuring”. Central to this view is the role of knowledge, education and learning for the success of the global information society and global information economy (Cogburn, 1998).

The role of universities in human capital development can be seen in two ways; first, to *supply* the skills for national economies; and secondly, on the *demand* side, to increase the drive within the national population for a process of “upskilling” by opening doors to greater access in higher education. Human capital is a step higher than “labour power” and should be seen as “the learned capacity to create added value from an existing system”. Thus, human capital, or rather knowledge capital, is becoming increasingly important for productivity growth and also national competitiveness (Arbo and Benneworth, 2007).

From an educational perspective, globalisation is considered a critical factor behind many of the future challenges facing SEA (Lee, 2006). Globalisation is a theme that has gained considerable currency as education evolves during the last few decades. Not only is a country influenced by its own socio-economic and political dynamics, globalisation too has an impact on a country's educational changes. Every facet of globalisation, be it economic, social, political or cultural, has a repercussive hand in education, particularly higher education in a globalised knowledge society (Lee, 2006).

I believe that higher education and ODL in Southeast Asian countries will be able to sustain a knowledge-based economy and reinforce it with a highly skilled workforce, capable of contributing to national and regional competitiveness. Given that higher education is perceived as an industry; with globalisation, the perception of higher education is now given a different perspective. It is now regarded as a marketable commodity, increasing trade in educational services and innovations related to information and communication technologies (Lee, 2006). Noting the unique historical and cultural resources as well as the economic priorities in each Southeast Asian country, ODL must also evolve accordingly, bearing in mind the need to remain relevant and current in the global context. As open universities throughout the region strive to adapt with global trends, there will be a sustained call for financial and institutional diversification, increased autonomy and quality control measures in order to cater to the different concerns of different social groups.

I also believe that open universities in SEA must always be innovative to remain relevant. An important area requiring crucial attention is curriculum development. The curricula offered through open universities must be functional, flexible and adaptable to the distinctive changes in the society generally and the workplace in particular. If the region wished to become more competitive in a rapidly changing global environment, the advancement of ODL must also remain conscious of the changing demands of the workplace. ODL could be seen as a significant component in any policy initiative in producing a quality workforce through lifelong learning. Focussing on curriculum development also means that the institution is giving priority to the needs of the learners. Being learner-centred, complemented by the need to upgrade facilities including learning management systems and internet access, upgrading assessment methods, tutor training, etcetera, will at the end of the day bring forth quality education.

## **V. SEA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

During the last two decades, the higher education scenario in SEA experienced increasing pressure for capacity building and infrastructure provision, a deterioration in quality, underfunding, limited academic capability, as well as inequitable access. As a result, a related feature in some Southeast Asian countries is increasing graduate unemployment, coupled with the inability of some economies to provide the needed economic growth impetus. Thus, one generally finds a mismatch between economic needs and university output, resulting in underemployment and brain drain (Lee, 2006). This has become a significant issue that needs to be addressed seriously.

In view of this economic pressure, a change or reform in higher education was deemed necessary. In the 1970s, Asian governments began to establish single-mode open universities to accommodate students who were unable to gain entry into conventional universities. Beginning with Ramkhamhaeng University in Thailand and with ever-expanding demand, soaring access, sophistication and affordability of technological infrastructure, Southeast Asian governments became more inclined to adopt ODL practices to enhance student intake and capture new markets. As the region races towards greater economic participation in a globalised and competitive world, higher education regimes and policies are experiencing reorganisation and restructuring, with ODL very much at the forefront.

In the light of increasing political and demographic demands, and the democratisation of secondary education, tertiary education in SEA has had no choice but to undergo massive expansion. Access to a university is seen as a chance for individual advancement, whilst at the national level, it is considered an instrument for human capital development, sustaining economic growth, social restructuring and poverty eradication. Widening access in SEA translated to higher education being made increasingly available to socially disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, women, indigenous people and people with disabilities (Lee, 2006). This is, perhaps, most pronounced with ODL institutions, as barriers in time and space are broken to provide better opportunities to all sections of society.

Subsequent to the 1997 economic crisis in many countries of this region, the provision of higher education in SEA witnessed the establishment of private for-profit corporations, non-profit organisations establishing private universities and colleges; previously the domain of the public sector. The increasing diversity in higher education has been exemplified by the establishment of “corporatised universities” in Malaysia, “entrepreneurial universities” in Singapore and “autonomous universities” in Indonesia and Thailand (Lee, 2006). This has possibly eased budgetary constraints faced by Southeast Asian governments. With privatisation, one can observe increased institutional autonomy and the emergence of self-sustaining enterprises capable of generating their own revenue. In the light of sustaining economic growth, wider access to higher education through ODL is seen as a credible approach to provide the working population with the opportunity for self-development, career advancement and the creation of new jobs and trades. Higher education in SEA has indeed become an industry; and with ODL as an auxiliary force, this industry will continue to act as the fulcrum for sustainable development in the region.

## **VI. COLLABORATIONS IN SEA AND BEYOND**

We all can agree that institutional collaborations will contribute significantly towards the development of resource sharing, student and scholar exchange programmes, and bilingual educational programmes among countries that share common interests and aspirations. Although we are already witnessing the laying of groundwork for such an endeavour in the form of ODL and ODL-related organisations in the region, there is still room for improvement.

In SEA and Asia at large, there are several national and regional organisations concerned with the advancement of ODL. Examples of which are the Malaysian Association of Distance Education (MADE); the SEAMEO Regional Open Learning Centre (SEAMOLEC), under the care of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO); and the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). The organisations mentioned above all seek to enhance partnerships and the sharing of knowledge in ODL throughout the region and beyond, alongside active involvement in quality assurance, policy-making, curriculum development, management and governance related to ODL institutions.

I believe that this sharing of common interests and expertise could be extended to include collaborations across continents, particularly in the form of a South-South co-operation involving ODL institutions in SEA and the African continent. I therefore propose that such a collaboration be immediately established to promote ODL in the two regions.

A good start would be examining the current cross-region partnerships under international bodies such as the UN and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). One significant example of an existing South-South collaboration is the effort between the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and COL. Perhaps Southeast Asian institutions could look at IGNOU as a touchstone and tailor our own endeavours specific to the needs and capacities of SEA itself.

With an international presence in 30 countries and together with the support of UNESCO and COL, IGNOU's programmes are made available through the Pan-African Satellite Network; something that is being developed by the Government of India (Daniel *et al.*, 2006). A significant aim behind this collaborative effort is serving the ODL interests of developing countries (in this case, African countries) by offering more appropriate and cheaper courses than those by more advanced countries.

In Malaysia, trans-border exchanges have been made through partnerships between private colleges and foreign universities to offer twinning programmes, credit transfer agreements, external degree programmes and the like (Lee, 2006). OUM has always made an effort to forge collaborations with other ODL institutions locally or abroad. Through the sharing of knowledge and expertise as well as technology transfer, OUM believes that all its ODL counterparts will be able to benefit from our experiences and vice-versa.

Despite the absence of formal collaborations, OUM and other ODL institutions in SEA have been watching and observing our partner institutions here in Africa. We are very much aware of the successes and good practices of like institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University, the National Open University of Nigeria and the University of South Africa (UNISA). From the viewpoint of a developing nation, I believe there is ample opportunity for us to learn and benefit from each other. Perhaps anchored to the efforts of bodies such as the UN and COL, South-South collaborations between Southeast Asian and African ODL institutions can be vigorously pursued.

COL and UNESCO signed an agreement in 1994 with the collective aim of carrying out co-operative programmes for the benefit among member countries of both organisations, which of course includes the countries of SEA and the African continent. Within this workplan agreement, there are specific programmes to provide cross-regional support, knowledge bases and others (accessed from <http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/4658>).

As asserted by Daniel *et al.* (2006), COL has supported IGNOU's efforts in three ways:

- Through the offering of COL Fellowships;
- Through the development of international postgraduate programmes; and
- Through the creation of a collaborative network in the form of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

It was also noted in the article that contemporary inter-institutional co-operation should be based upon five essential principles; i.e.:

- Clarity of purpose and knowing that the wants of all partners are achievable through co-operation;
- The smaller the group of partners, the better are the chances for success;
- Everyone must contribute, and everyone must gain (preferably financially);
- There must be people committed to the collaborative venture in each partner institution; and
- The enterprise must be adequately funded from the start; and with a credible strategy to generate sustained funding.

With a conscious effort to mirror local priorities and needs, and from the viewpoint of OUM and Malaysia, I foresee several areas for potential partnership between SEA and Africa, such as:

- The sharing of experiences through mutual visits and staff exchange;
- Joint research initiatives;
- Exchange of content and learning materials;
- Utilisation and sharing of new technologies;
- Joint quality initiatives; and
- Conference organisations and strengthening networks.

I would like to suggest the cross-border provision in higher education as a good starting point to initiate South-South collaborations. COL and UNESCO have been working together for over a decade to provide, among others, a Cross-Border Provision in Higher Education. Based on the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education as an international framework, this particular programme focuses on research and capacity building to maximise the benefits of cross-border education in developing nations. Using this programme as an example and point of reference, I believe SEA and Africa could perhaps launch trans-border co-operative programmes through practical and tangible partnerships.

## VII. CONCLUSION

I would like to end my address by sharing these two quotes with you.

The first is from The United Nations Development Agenda (2007) which clearly regards education as a vital part of the shared goals and visions in economic and social affairs:

*“Providing every individual with an education is an integral part of the ultimate goal of improving individual well-being and so is an end in itself. In addition, as long recognized and emphasized once again by the 2005 World Summit, both formal and informal education are vital to developing productive human potential. Universal and equitable access to quality education is therefore an indispensable part of the effort to... promote full and productive employment.”*

The second quote is from Sir John Daniel (2004), the President and Chief Executive Officer of COL when he spoke of ODL for sustainable development in Canada over four years ago:

*“...the appropriate use of open and distance learning allows you to increase access, improve quality and cut cost – all at the same time. This is an educational revolution with the potential dramatically to accelerate the development that will enhance the freedoms of the mass of humankind.”*

We must accept that ODL has become a viable alternative to the traditional mode of learning in developing countries, particularly in their human capital development efforts and consequently, raising their respective socio-economic status. This has been proven by the proliferation of ODL institutions around the world. Asia, including SEA, is proud to have some of the largest and well-established ODL institutions and open universities the world over and this clearly indicates that ODL has contributed immensely in providing equal opportunity in higher education to the masses in the region.

In the same context, open universities have also proliferated in African countries; some prominent ones including the University of South Africa (UNISA), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as well as our host, the National Open University of Nigeria. Much like their Asian counterparts, these ODL institutions have also contributed greatly to the socio-economic well-being of each respective nation and region.

I foresee the next step for SEA and Africa is to embark on the fostering of strategic relationships in and between both regions in the form of effective inter-regional, trans-border collaborations to promote the development of ODL. I am more than certain that if we combine our efforts in this arena, we will reap the rewards and scale greater heights in ODL. Through this, we will be able to enhance our contribution to sustain a healthy socio-economic development in both SEA and Africa.

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