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Proposed book:
Higher Education in South Asian and South East Asian Countries: Current Perspectives and Challenges

Expanding Higher Education for Sustainable Development in Asia: Are the Open Universities up to the Task?

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Summary

Open universities were the most significant development in global higher education in the last third of the 20th century. Some grew to be very large in size (over one million students) and collectively they expanded access to higher education substantially, particularly, but not only, in Asia and Africa. Moreover, by making higher education available off campus to people of all ages, many of them studying part-time, they expanded the missions of universities in ways that conventional campus universities have slowly begun to adopt. Forecasts suggest that tens of millions of additional students will want to undertake higher education in the next 20 years. The open universities, of which there are now over 50 worldwide, many of them in Asia, would seem well placed to play a large role in catering to these students. However, as we approach the end of this second decade of the 21st century, it appears that many open universities are losing strength and impact. Some have never really got off the ground, others may have become too large to be manageable, most have difficulty in adopting modern educational technologies and some have been savaged by changes in government policy. The paper will review the current state of open universities and suggest how they might better rise to the challenges of the 21st century, when the UN Sustainable Development Goals include the expansion of higher education and the improvement of its quality.

Introduction

Open universities were the most significant development in the ends and means of tertiary education in the last third of the 20th century. As regards ends, or purposes, their creation reflected a widespread realisation that tertiary education should be made available to a much wider public than the young full-time students who were its traditional clientele in the mid-20th century. Serving adult students often in full-time employment, who wished to study part-time, required new approaches. Tertiary education had to arrange to take its programmes to these adult students, rather than requiring them to come to campuses for daytime lecture courses.

As regards means, starting in the 1960s there was an explosion of new media of communication. Radio and television extended their reach and were followed by the rapid development of information technology as computers became ubiquitous, making possible

the Internet and, more recently, a plethora of social media. Both the spirit and the practical import of these innovations were nicely captured by Lord Geoffrey Crowther in his speech to the inaugural ceremony of the UK Open University in 1969 (Crowther, 1969). He said: "We are open as to methods. The original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. We start, it is true, in dependence on, and in grateful partnership with, the British Broadcasting Corporation. But already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that before long actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the Industrial Revolution of two centuries ago. Then, the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of our muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of our minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second.

"It has been said that the addiction of the traditional university to the lecture room, is a sign of its inability to adjust to the invention of the printing press. That, of course, is unjust. But at least no such reproach will be levelled at The Open University in the Communications Revolution. Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding."

Crowther's speech also gave the UK Open University its strap-line: 'open as to people, open as to places, open to as methods and open as to ideas'. The principles encapsulated in this slogan have been adopted, to a greater or lesser extent, by the more than fifty open universities that have been created around the world in the intervening years.

These open universities were not, of course, the first attempt to teach at a distance. Some cite Saint Paul's epistles to the early Christian churches as a – very successful – distance learning initiative. Centuries later, when the industrial revolution combined mass-production printing with postal systems based on rail transport, education by correspondence developed rapidly and reached millions of people from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Notwithstanding its reach, however, the public rarely accorded much prestige to correspondence education. It was mostly offered by private sector firms, which were often accused of giving greater priority to generating high revenues by recruiting large numbers of students than to providing them with the quality teaching materials and support that would enable them to complete their courses and programmes successfully.

In the mid-20th century, and notably in the design of the UKOU, there was a conscious attempt to address the shortcomings of correspondence education, an ambition facilitated by the injection of significant public funds. First, the UKOU made large investments in the learning materials that it provided to students. These were developed by multi-disciplinary teams of academics and media professionals to ensure their intellectual quality and then produced to a high standard using a variety of media (print, audio, video, computing). Second, it created an extensive student support system with thousands of part-time tutors serving learners all over the country, both providing feedback on their assignments and offering optional face-to-face tutorial sessions in every locality. Third, the UKOU was

backed by a sophisticated IT system that enabled it to keep track of student progress and offer counselling as required.

The first generation of open universities largely espoused the ideals and practices of the UKOU as far as their resources allowed. Some of them became very large (over one million students) and, collectively, they have expanded access to higher education substantially, particularly, but not only, in Asia and Africa. Moreover, by making higher education available off campus to people of all ages, many studying part-time, they expanded the missions of universities in ways that conventional campus universities are slowly beginning to adopt. Forecasts suggest that tens of millions of additional students will want to undertake higher education in the next 20 years. The open universities, many of them in Asia, would seem well placed to play a large role in catering to these students.

In the first part of this paper we shall describe the salient features of these open universities, drawing on the early work of Daniel (1995) and the recent report by Mishra (2017).

The second section of the paper provides a summary of the challenges facing open universities as we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century – and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the UK Open University. The essence of these challenges is that many conventional campus universities are adopting both the missions and the methods that were pioneered by the open universities. It took several decades before most traditional universities made serious attempts to recruit part-time and adult students, and even longer before they started to adopt the technologies of distance education. Indeed, it was only with the emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s that most campus institutions began to take distance education seriously. This section of the paper will reflect discussions held at a Roundtable of executive heads of open universities convened before the World Conference on Online Learning held in Toronto in October 2017 (see: Open University – EADTU, 2017).

In the third part of the paper we suggest what open universities must do in order to remain the pre-eminent providers of tertiary education at a distance to adult and part-time students. They will need to effect reforms in most aspects of their operations, from institutional organisation, through curriculum and pedagogy to the use of technology. In this final section, we shall draw on the conclusions of a useful webinar on 'The Future of the Distance Education University' held by the EDEN, the European Distance Education Network, on March 5, 2018 (EDEN, 2018).

Open Universities: a diverse reality

More than 50 open universities have been established since the UK Open University was granted its Royal Charter in 1969 and new ones are still emerging. A recent example is the Odisha State Open University in India, established in 2015 (http://osou.ac.in/). The Asian Association of Open Universities lists 45 full members (AAOU, 2018) and the Asian countries of the Commonwealth account for a significant proportion of these institutions. In his recent report, Mishra (2017) lists 27 open universities that responded to his survey, including 15 in India alone (two additional private state universities in India did not answer the survey) as well as institutions in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. There are also large open universities in non-Commonwealth Asian countries. Some of

China's Radio and TV Universities (RTVUs) have been accorded the status of open universities. Both the RTVUs and China's Open Universities are loosely associated with the Open University of China, (formerly the China Central TV & Radio University), a system that accounts for many millions of students.

Some other non-Commonwealth Asian countries with well-established open universities are Iran, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. Student numbers in each of these institutions are in the tens or hundreds of thousands (e.g. Iran's Payame Noor Open University with nearly one million students).

Although focussed on the Commonwealth open universities, the study by Mishra (2017) can serve as a good illustration of the general features of open universities and their diversity. We summarise their profiles as follows.

Open universities:

- Are usually distance-teaching institutions, although some (e.g. the OU of Hong Kong) also have programmes for on-campus students. Only a minority (14 out of 27) offer their programmes mainly online, the others use multi-media distance education methods with considerable use of print.
- Enrol relatively large numbers of students (e.g. Bangladesh OU – 500,000; AIOU Pakistan – 1.2 million). The 27 open universities surveyed by Mishra enrol a total of some 4.5 million students with an overall gender balance close to 50/50, although with wide variations among institutions.
- When taken as a group, teach programmes at all ISCED levels in a wide range of subjects.
- Have considerable attrition rates. Mishra calculated 'output rates' by comparing enrolment and awards in a particular year. The results varied from a high of 55% for the UKOU to a low of less than 5% for the Netaji Subhas Open University. We note, however, that whatever teaching methods are used, programmes aimed at part-time adult students usually have higher attrition rates than programmes taught to full-time students in classrooms.
- Rely very heavily on the use of part-time teachers (a total of nearly 200,000 in the 27 open universities that responded to Mishra's survey – compared to fewer than 8,000 full time teachers). There is, however, a wide range of practice: the ratio of part-time to full-time teachers varies from a high of over 500 at the Allama Iqbal OU to under two at the UKOU.
- Are mostly financially comfortable. Broadly, those institutions with large student bodies that support themselves mainly on tuition fees generate surpluses, whereas those that have depended on significant state support have experienced difficulties as government funding has been cut.
- Are not, in most cases, substantially engaged in research. The UKOU, which has some world-class research groups, is a notable exception to this generalisation. Where the other open universities are beginning to engage in research, favoured topics are: open and distance learning for sustainable development; ICTs and learning technologies; open education resources; quality assurance; and tracer studies.

- Identify their top three priorities for the coming years as: strengthening student support and the eLearning infrastructure; the development of skills programmes; and quality assurance.

The challenges

As we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century, however, it appears that open universities generally are losing speed and impact. Some have not yet really got off the ground, others have become too large to be manageable, most have difficulty in adopting modern educational technologies and some have been savaged by changes in government policy. This section reviews the current state of open universities and our final section suggests how they might better rise to the challenges of the 21st century. A key challenge is encapsulated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include the expansion of tertiary education to reach tens of millions of new learners and the improvement of its quality.

Nevertheless, whatever the current challenges they face, it is important to acknowledge that the open universities have already changed the paradigms of higher education globally. They have drawn attention to the learning needs of a wider and older range of people and demonstrated that teaching in classrooms on campus is not the only way to reach them.

As a direct result, higher education systems have grown enormously. Most campus universities, now well aware of this large pool of unserved learners, are acquiring skills in new ways of reaching them, notably through online programmes. In some countries, this awareness is heightened by demographic trends that are reducing the numbers of the young people that have been the traditional clientele of face-to-face teaching institutions.

The question is: how should open universities dress now that the 'conventional' universities are stealing their clothes? Are open universities now the victims of their own success?

I pay tribute to the work of two colleagues in addressing this topic. Dr. Ross Paul succeeded me as vice-president of Athabasca University and then some years later as president of Laurentian University. Since retiring as president of the University of Windsor he has specialised in the study of university leadership and management. I have drawn inspiration from Dr. Paul's paper: *Open Universities: A Storied Past but an Uncertain Future?* (Paul, 2017). A first version was published in *Distance Education in China* and he is continuing to refine and extend it.

Professor Alan Tait has been a colleague for many years, both at the UKOU and when we worked together to create the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) in the 1990s. Professor Tait worked with me last year on a project that is the basis for this section of the chapter. The 27th ICDE World Conference on Online Learning took place in Toronto in October, 2017 and was an enormously successful event that attracted some 1,400 delegates. We took advantage of this large gathering of researchers and practitioners of open and distance learning to bring together the executive heads of open universities to discuss the contemporary challenges their institutions face. This took the form of a one-day Roundtable.

The planning process itself gave some useful insights into the current state of the open university world. Preparations began in autumn 2016 with the identification of nearly 60

open universities on all continents. Invitations – and later reminders – were sent to the executive heads of these institutions in October 2016 and elicited 22 replies. We worked with this subset of heads to identify the topics of most concern to them and to develop an appropriate agenda for the Roundtable meeting.

Then, beginning in March 2017, Professor Alan Tait interacted with the respondents by questionnaire and through telephone interviews. He distilled his findings into a 2,500-word text *'Open Universities: the next phase'*, which was sent to the respondents before the Roundtable (Tait, 2017). Some twenty executive heads confirmed their attendance by September 2017, but in the event only nine of them were able to participate in the Roundtable in Toronto. The others had to withdraw, some at the last minute, because of delays in obtaining visas or for various family, political or institutional reasons.

Restricting attendance to executive heads and not accepting substitutes undoubtedly limited the number of open universities that could be represented. However, the heads welcomed this opportunity to hold candid discussions with their peers in a closed setting. A larger question is why more than half of the 50 'open universities' originally approached never replied at all despite reminders.

The programme for the Roundtable was developed around the topics for which the executive heads had expressed most interest. Its format reflected their wish to spend the day interacting with each other. Therefore, apart from Professor Tait's short presentation of his overview, *'Open Universities: the next phase'*, the day was wholly devoted to sessions during which the participants could interact with each other. Every executive head present got the chance to work with every other head in the course of the day. A report of the event was circulated to participants (see: http://sirjohn.ca/publications/)

Seven topics were discussed at the Roundtable.

Missions

First, are the missions of open universities evolving? All agreed that open universities have made openness and access a mainstream concern across higher education generally, although in some countries conventional HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) are still doing little to address this. The OUs continue to extend their missions in an incremental manner, notably using technology to make registration, study and feedback more convenient.

Two of the OUs present, Wawasan in Malaysia and OU Hong Kong, now have full-time on-campus students alongside their distance offerings. In Hong Kong, the numbers on campus (9,000) almost equal those studying at a distance. Teaching on campus brings these OUs to the attention of a wider population.

The formal identification of tertiary education in the new UN Sustainable Development Goals has legitimised the goal of serving wider populations. The challenge is that most of the tens of millions of new students will be in Asia and Africa, where the OUs are already under significant enrolment pressure.

Is there a limit to how large an OU can become without losing effectiveness? Are OUs becoming complacent once they become mega-universities? Should they be more ambitious?

Demographics

Second, how are OU student demographics shifting? They are changing in different ways depending on the country – a few towards older students, but mostly towards younger students, although not necessarily to school leavers. However, many of these younger students are not coming to OUs for undergraduate degrees but for graduate certificates and diplomas that can be an asset in the workplace.

Competing to win

Third, how do OUs compete to win? Which technologies hold most promise? Some of the OUs at the Roundtable now teach entirely online, whereas most outside the West use printed materials. All have plans to increase their online teaching, but IT is proving most useful in the administrative and student support functions. OUs using paper for teaching now have IT systems for admissions and the processing of assignments. By speeding up processes these have positive impacts on student progression and retention, while also reducing corruption. The general view was that focussing technological innovation too much on pedagogy misses more promising opportunities for its use.

Operating at scale

Fourth, a session aimed at sharing experiences of mastering the use of technology at scale revealed exceptions to the general correlation between an OU's enrolments and the size of its national population. While most of the mega-universities (100,000+ enrolments) are in large population countries (e.g. India, China, Nigeria) some countries with populations over 100 million (e.g. Philippines) have fewer enrolments in their OUs than those serving much smaller populations in Canada. This raised the question of whether some of the smaller OUs have handicapped themselves by adopting too fully the division of labour and specialisation of functions characteristic of the industrial model of the larger OUs.

It was surprising to find that, with the notable exception of the UKOU and its creation of FutureLearn, the OUs generally have not engaged much with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

Collaboration and partnerships

Fifth, most of the OUs at the Roundtable already have the inter-institutional partnerships they need. There is, for example, extensive course sharing between the state OUs in India. However, partnerships need close attention and management, even when the original agreements are clear. One OU that is itself formally a private institution has had some bad experiences in trying to collaborate with private sector organisations. The challenges of partnerships are several times greater when they are offshore.

Blending flexibility, quality and scale effectively

Sixth, flexibility is good, but so are effective regulations. In the Netherlands, the OU has improved its completion and retention rates dramatically simply by tightening up the regulations about start dates and completion deadlines. It is necessary to put reasonable obligations on students in order to make them give some priority to their studies.

A refrain throughout the Roundtable was that whereas most of the OUs felt that the quality of their teaching and support was at least as good as that of the conventional HEIs in their jurisdictions, they – or ODL generally – still had a poor reputation with the public. Some heads felt that using the term 'distance education' – and even the term 'open' was not helpful. Clearly, some OUs have not yet managed to shed the unflattering image that they inherited from correspondence education.

Government relations

Whilst there was no session at the Roundtable devoted specifically to government relations, this vital aspect of OU management came up repeatedly. Most OUs have been the darling of their government at some stage in their development, but it is impossible to retain this status for decades as governments and their political ideologies change. Success in this vital relationship comes, not surprisingly, from trying to use the considerable power and reach of the OU to help government achieve its own education and training goals. This will often mean shifting the focus of the academic staff, in particular, to new aims. The smaller OUs have special challenges and both the Canadian OUs have lived through near-death experiences, emphasising the absolute importance of nurturing the link between an OU and its government's priorities.

We conclude this section with three observations.

First, open universities are a very diverse reality. The descriptor 'open' conceals great variations in size, mission and pedagogy.

Second, whether the terms 'open' and 'distance' are helpful or not, the open universities are proud of what they are doing to open up higher education and bring it to new places.

Third, without underestimating the challenges of the wrenching changes that the OUs feel they must make for the future, they are confident that they have the right values and vision for the times.

How can open universities stay ahead?

At the end of the first section of this chapter we noted, citing Mishra (2017), that the open universities he surveyed shared three priorities for the coming years: strengthening student support and the eLearning infrastructure; the development of skills programmes; and quality assurance. It is interesting to juxtapose these priorities with the discussions held in a webinar on 'The Future of Distance Teaching Universities' by the European Distance Education Network in March 2018 (EDEN, 2018).

The four speakers were Professor Tony Bates, Sir John Daniel, Dr. Ross Paul and Dr. Antonio Teixeira. Participants in the webinar asked the speakers about various threats that newer developments pose to open universities. Here is a lightly edited version of the questions and the speakers' responses.

Question 1: Could MOOCs with full accreditation replace existing distance education universities?

*Answer (Professor Tony Bates): "*Not unless they come up with an effective business model or really redefine MOOCs. At the moment, for 'open access' MOOCs that end up with an institutional degree, institutions in the USA are charging around US$20,000 - $40,000 because of the high cost of quality assessment and learner support (see: http://wp.me/pi2SZ-2QR).

"Accreditation is a challenge that is somewhat country specific but MOOCs have been having trouble being accredited in the USA. Although the institution may give credit, the accrediting bodies in the USA have not been recognising the qualifications, especially but not exclusively the professional associations. This may change as the Trump administration somewhat deregulates accreditation, but it is still almost impossible to move accreditation for distance learning programs across state boundaries, for instance, so a student taking a distance learning course or program from an institution in California from their home in Kentucky may not have that qualification recognised in Kentucky (a similar situation exists in some provinces in Canada). Erasmus has by and large got over that problem, but Europe has its own issues here.

"In some cases, where employers are desperate for qualified workers, this may not matter - the institution's credibility will be what matters, so for instance MITx's Micromasters (https://micromasters.mit.edu/) may carry more weight with employers than a Master's degree from a less prestigious institution. Note also that, although the distance-taught BSc in Mining Engineering at Queen's University was built in collaboration with Ontario mining companies, if a graduate wants to move outside Ontario or into another engineering field they may have problems if the programme is not accredited with the professional association of engineers.

"However, we are in a transition period between traditional degrees and qualifications and building new models of accreditation that meet the rapidly changing demands of a digital society and economy. We will see new models emerging and they may well not be coming from distance teaching universities and so could be a real threat. What distance education universities should be doing is to partner with traditional universities to build new models of accreditation and new qualifications, and to lobby for more flexible transfer of credits and more flexible qualifications."

Question 2: Do open universities need a new business model to contribute to the SDG4?

Answer (Dr. Ross Paul): "I believe that all universities, open and conventional, need new business models "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

"Open universities have the advantage of long experience with accredited asynchronous learning courses and programs, but their reliance on the industrial model requires very large enrolments and fairly regimented programs of study for sustainability. So, the key questions for me involve how well the predominant industrial distance education model is suited to an educational world increasingly driven by the needs of digital learners – instant feedback, e-mail and text interaction, significant student involvement in course design and delivery,

degrees of self-pacing, inter-disciplinarity, etc., - all in a customised accredited academic framework.

"Open universities need to change dramatically to achieve the objectives of the SDG4, perhaps even more dramatically than do conventional universities. The principal challenge for conventional universities is to integrate their approaches to online learning as part of a deliberate strategy, one that requires a much stronger institution-wide approach to teaching and learning that directly challenges the traditional and almost sacrosanct authority of the professor in the classroom. Open universities have to come at the same goals from the opposite side – providing much more individualised attention to students. This requires a complete overhaul of the industrial model.

"Open universities also have to do a much better job of student support. I confess that I was unhappy with the UKOU's decision to close 7 of its 9 regional offices, not least because in a presentation to a UKOU board retreat about 10 years ago I placed them at the heart of the UKOU's then success.

"Open universities in the West need a new business model for their very existence, although open universities in Asia and Africa will be sustained for years to come by the overwhelming demands for access to tertiary education.

"This short answer is easy. It is much more difficult to envision exactly what a particular open university has to do to undo the troublesome parts of its industrial model, become more flexible and support its students in a cost-effective way."

Question 3: If recognition and validation of non-formal learning takes off, how will this impact open universities?

Answer (Dr Antonio Teixeira): "This will have a major impact not only on open universities, but on the entire higher education systems. New education providers will emerge, of course! But, traditional (distance or face-to-face) institutions will basically prevail. But they will have to adapt in order to survive. The critical element is how they will facilitate the transition combine non- formal and formal learning certification. Because of their greater institutional flexibility and capability to adjust to different and changing contexts, I believe distance education universities will be more prepared to explore this opportunity. This will be most notably the case of open universities. In fact, universities will have to transform their awards systems, making them more modular and personalised, which will represent a competitive advantage for open universities."

Question 4: How can open universities ensure they stay relevant for the skills needed in the job market - especially when many students already have work experience and are looking to integrate what they learn into practice?

*Answer (Dr. Antonio Teixeira): "*Working students represent the main target group of open universities today, at least in Europe (e.g. at the Open University of Portugal working students account for over 90% of the total number enrolled in formal programmes). Many non-formal learners are also taking advantage of the learning opportunities provided by the open universities, which differ from other higher education institutions. Because of their higher institutional flexibility and their mandated social mission, open universities connect

more closely with society and should have greater sensitivity to emerging societal needs. In the future, as traditional higher education institutions open up and start providing digital flexible education at a large scale, open universities will have to go a step further. They will have to introduce a more extensive combination of prior learning recognition with new competence-based and modular forms of learning assessment and certification. Also, they will increasingly allow learners to co-design their own courses. In a network society, open universities will have to use a network learning approach. Thus, it will be critical for them to enhance their institutional flexibility by using collective intelligence. As with other kinds of institutions, open universities will use crowdsourcing to scale up their capacity."

Question 5: What are the particular challenges for open universities in middle-income and poorer countries?

*Answer (Sir John Daniel): "*The key task for open universities in middle-income and poorer countries is to stay very close to their governments in order to help them achieve their public policy goals in tertiary education. These goals are various. Some governments flirt with the global university rankings and spend large amounts of money (and sometimes engage in dubious practices) to move one or two of their 'elite' institutions up by a few places in these rankings. Malaysia took this infatuation with rankings to a ridiculous extent, while Saudi Arabia is open about paying Nobel laureates to put their names on research papers from some of its universities in order to improve the bibliometric data that feeds into the rankings.

"Most governments, however, also realise that educating and training the mass of their people to engage successfully in 21st century work is really their major challenge in tertiary education. Open universities can do much to help in this area and powerful government-OU links are developing as a consequence. For example, Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia helped the government implement a massive teacher development programme. That project is pretty well complete, so UT and the Indonesian government are now working on collaborations in other areas of massive need, such as health care.

"Another example is China. For a long time its Radio & TV universities (RTVUs) were regarded by the national and provincial governments as definitely second rate and were therefore constrained as to the programmes that they could offer. However, faced with the need to provide lifelong learning for some 600 million people, the government has turned to the RTVUs, promoting some of the them to 'Open University' status and allowing them to offer four-year programmes. The *quid pro quo* is that they also pick up the lifelong learning agenda on a massive scale, which they are doing with exciting use of media. The former Shanghai RTVU, now the Shanghai Open University, has a particularly intense symbiotic relationship with its city government.

"Clearly the lifelong learning agenda will require OUs to get much better at teaching practical subjects through short cycle programmes. This requires a variety of partnerships. Combining the scale and reach of an OU with the facilities of local partners for face-to-face and practical sessions is powerful."

Conclusions

Tens of millions of additional Asian students will seek tertiary education over the next decades. The inclusion of tertiary education in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 reflects member governments' convictions about its economic and social importance. Open universities should play a major role in achieving the SDG target because they were created with the aspiration of being open to people, places, methods and ideas. They aim to operate at scale using all available technologies to bring quality tertiary education to all who can benefit from it, thus equipping people to lead fulfilling lives in the 21st century.

To date, unfortunately, the reality of a good number of open universities in Asia has been somewhat disappointing. Either because of lack of resources, or a failure to focus their efforts on quality and student support, some of these institutions have not yet managed to put the poor reputation of correspondence education behind them. The Mishra (2017) review, however, provides hope. It found that the open universities identified strengthening student support and the eLearning infrastructure, the development of skills programmes, and quality assurance as their key priorities.

If the open universities can implement these priorities they should find themselves in an increasingly favourable situation. As the target date of 2030 for the Sustainable Development Goals approaches, governments will likely shift their own priorities from the nurturing of elite universities to the provision of tertiary education for the mass of their citizens. The open universities are the institutions best equipped to help them achieve this challenging ambition.

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