

Special Issue

34th Annual
Conference of
AAOU

THE OPEN

QUARTERLY
2021 - ii



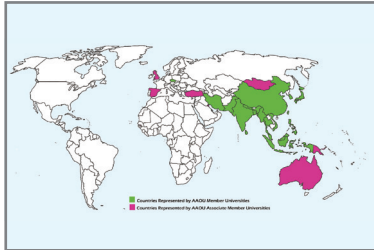
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OF SRI LANKA**

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THE OPEN

**QUARTERLY
2021- ii**

OUSL hosts the 34th Annual AAOU Conference this year and needless to say this is a moment when history lives and recreates amongst our midst. Firstly, AAOU is the region's most significant meeting of minds whose primary focus on ODL and its envisioned impact is bound to have an inspiration on the lives of all ODL practitioners. Secondly, OUSL—and therefore the nation—hosts the conference after 30 years, having last hosted AAOU in 1991. For the past two years the university has been abuzz with this event regardless of the pandemic that ruled the earth and air in the world. This special issue of AAOU has been created as symbolic tribute to AAOU as well OUSL. As you will read from the articles published here, OUSL and AAOU have been inseparable and indivisible partners on a journey towards expanding the boundaries of the ODL discipline. So here are our accolades to the heroes of OUSL who faced the pandemic to convert a traditional, yet grand, public conference into a sleek and sophisticated hybrid event. Our honor to researchers across the globe who were undeterred by the pandemic and will be with us as OUSL proudly hosts the event. Our compliments to the OUSL steering committees who gave leadership to this momentous event. And our heartfelt praise to AAOU, the energy-center of the ODL universe.

Lal Medawattegedara

The Asian Association of the Open Universities (AAOU) was founded in 1987 by a group of Open Universities in Asia, who realized the significant contribution of distance education in democratizing the provision of learning opportunities to humankind. The inaugural meeting and the First conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities was held on 13th November 1987 in Bangkok, hosted by the Sukothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand.

The seven founding members of the AAOU are Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India, Universitas Terbuka (UT) of Indonesia, Japan University of the Air (now the Open University of Japan - OUI), Korean Air and Correspondence University (now the Korean National Open University - KNOU), Allama Iqbal Open University (AIKU) of Pakistan, The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and the Sukothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) of Thailand.

Ever since 1987, over the last 34 years the AAOU has conducted its Annual Conference hosted by its member universities every year. Consequently, the Open University of Sri Lanka hosted the 4th AAOU Conference in 1991 under the theme "Face-to Face Components in Distance Education" in Colombo. Unfortunately, the 34th Annual Conference of the AAOU, which was to be held in 2020 in Colombo, Sri Lanka is the first conference in the history of the AAOU that had to be postponed due to the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic situation in the world.

Objectives of the AAOU

The AAOU is a non-profit association of autonomous legally established institutions of higher learning primarily concerned with education at a distance. It strives to widen the educational opportunities available to all people in Asia and to improve the quality of the institutions in terms of their educational management, teaching, and research.

AAOU promotes education by distance teaching systems, as well as professional and ethical standards; develops potentialities of open and distance education; cooperates with official bodies and others directly or indirectly interested in education at a distance; and facilitates cooperation with other similar regional and international bodies.



The objectives of the AAOU are:

- a.** widening the educational opportunities available to all the people of the region and improving the cost of member institutions by exchanging management information, teaching materials and research.
- b.** helping to promote education by distance teaching systems and developing its potentialities.
- c.** helping to promote professional and ethical standards amongst distance educators.
- d.** cooperating with official bodies and others directly or indirectly interested in distance education.
- e.** facilitating cooperation with other similar regional and international bodies in all the above objectives, and
- f.** doing all other things incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objectives.

Current Activities of the AAOU

AAOU currently has forty-seven (47) full members and sixteen (16) associate members. After more than 30 years of development, the AAOU has become one of the most influential open and distance education alliances in Asia. The organization promotes the optimization and sharing of open distance education achievements and educational resources in the Asian region through short-term scholar exchange programmes and the Asian Open University MOOC portal. In addition, as a member of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the AAOU also actively participates in various international

open and distance education affairs, fully demonstrating the concept, achievements, and practical experience of open distance educators in Asia, and enhancing its voice in the international open and distance education field.



Figure 1 : 4th AAOU Conference in Sri Lanka - Professor Arjuna Aluvihare, Chairman, UGC, Professor Dayantha Wijesekara, Vice-Chancellor, OUSL; Professor V. Kulandaiswamy, Vice-Chancellor, University of Madras among the delegates

Membership of the Association consists of three categories: Full and Associate Membership, Supporting membership and Honorary membership.

Full and Associate Membership for autonomous legally established institutions of higher learning primarily involved in distance education. Full membership is limited to dedicated open and distance teaching institutions located within the Asian continent and whose primary mode of instructional delivery is through the distance mode. Associate membership is open to all institutions active in promoting or delivering education by the distance mode through departments, faculties, centres, or schools of external or off-campus studies and programs. Associate members have the right to participate in all of the meetings and activities of the Association except the right to sit in the Executive Committee meeting and the right to vote in the Annual Meeting of the General Body. All full and associate member institutions are represented by their respective heads or their nominees; these nominees also represent their heads in the relevant meetings of the AAOU.

Supporting Membership is for non-educational organizations that wish to support the aims and objectives of the Association and to participate in its activities in a meaningful way: Donor supporting membership is open to organizations wishing to make significant financial contributions in support of the Association. Corporate supporting membership which is open to business corporations wishing to be linked to the Association in a mutually beneficial way.

Honorary Membership is for distinguished individuals who have made significant contributions to open and distance education and/or to the Association. An Honorary Member must be a senior academic or administrator (either serving or retired) of a member institution.

The AAOU Annual Conference, hosted in turn by member institutions, is a stimulating forum for all those associated with open and distance learning in Asia, particularly academics, administrators and students. It provides a focal point for bringing everyone up to date on the issues, ideas, and developments in the field of open distance learning.

The AAOU Inter-University Staff Exchange Fellowship Programme aims to provide a platform for capacity-building and the establishment of sustainable partnerships, as well as fostering the exchange of knowledge and promotion of mutual understanding among staff of Asian open universities. Currently, the following institutions offer fellowships to deserving candidates in the AAOU Inter-University Exchange Fellowship Programme:

- *Korea National Open University (KNOU), Korea (2 fellowships)*
- *National Open University (NOU) Taiwan, Taiwan (2 fellowships)*
- *Shanghai Open University (SOU), China (15 fellowships)*
- *Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand (1 fellowship)*
- *The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), Sri Lanka (2 fellowships)*
- *Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia (2 fellowships)*
- *University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Philippines (3 fellowships)*



<http://en.ouchn.edu.cn/index.php/2015-10-19-08-55-07/international-organizations/2994-aaou>

The AAOU Journal is a peer reviewed open access indexed journal that is currently being published by the Emerald Publisher. In the year 2021, papers are being invited for the 15th volume of the journal. Starting from 2019, Emerald presents “Emerald Literati Awards” annually for the outstanding paper published in the year in addition to naming Highly Commended Papers. The AAOU Journal is currently indexed in, British Library, Cabell's Directories, and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). In particular, the journal has been awarded the “DOAJ Seal”, indicating that the journal has satisfied the requirements of having a clear commitment to open access best practices, of high levels of commitment to publishing standards and best practices, and its open access model is the most open. Authors of the papers (one author in case of multiple authored papers) who published in the AAOU Journal are entitled for AAOU Conference Fellowship. The AAOU is making every effort in getting the journal more widely indexed.



AAOU eBulletin is published by the AAOU to enhance communication among AAOU members and update them on the latest events and developments at member institutions, as well as provide updated news about the AAOU and ODL field, to bring the most recent information directly to scholars and professionals. It is the intention of the AAOU Secretariat to publish the AAOU eBulletin, once in two months.

A new initiative introduced by the AAOU in the recent years is the AAOU Collaborative Research Programme whereby AAOU will annually fund research work undertaken jointly by researchers from two or more member universities.

Future of the AAOU

The AAOU being a dynamic proactive organization is always looking to expand its activities to serve its membership and the wider stakeholders. In this respect some of the activities that are planned by the AAOU are given below.

The AAOU proposes to expand one of its recent initiatives, of establishing an Asian MOOC which is hosted in the Asian Learning Portal website and is open for any member university to post their MOOCs. In this respect the AAOU would provide guidelines to AAOU members on MOOCs development. Another step in expanding this initiative is to develop MOOCs Certification Programmes using MOOCs offered by AAOU members and apply the Open badge system. Another proposal that the AAOU would like to implement in the future is establishing a repository of Asian OERs. One of the ambitious projects that the AAOU has embarked on is the development of an Accreditation System for Quality Assurance of Technology Mediated Education in times of Openness in the Digital Age that aimed to develop an accreditation instrument for institutional level accreditation. After a series of virtual and face-to-face meetings, an accreditation instrument for institutional level accreditation has been developed.

The AAOU expected to roll out this accreditation system at the 34th AAOU Annual Conference in Sri Lanka, however, unfortunately due to the pandemic situation it could not finalize it and hopefully it will be introduced at the 35th Annual AAOU Conference to be held in 2022.

Currently the AAOU is also involved with two other new projects: The first initiative is writing a book on distance education in Asia. The AAOU's earlier proposal was to publish this book at the 34th AAOU Conference in Sri Lanka. Once again due to the pandemic situation this project too had to be postponed.

The second initiative involves a collaboration to develop a post-graduate degree programme in Instructional Design and Technology to be undertaken by AAOU member institutions targeting teachers and professional involved in instructional design, both in distance education and technology enhanced residential education. It is envisaged that this programme could be launched in the future With the demand for higher education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Asian countries, exponentially increasing, and the radical changes that are happening to the

concept of traditional education, with the rise of the internet and new technologies, where being physically present in a classroom is not the only learning option anymore, Open and Distance Learning in Asia is expected to grow manifold.

Consequently much pressure is exerted on the educational institutes to meet this demand with limited resources. In this scenario, strategic partnerships with likeminded partners in sharing resources, courses, and even the whole programmes are necessary. In this respect, the role of the Asian Association of the Open Universities in facilitating these interventions is expected to be significant. Based on the past record, it can be confidently stated that the AAOU will be able to face up to these challenges and deliver its mandate for the benefit of its members and the learners throughout Asia.



Prof. S. A. Ariadurai

Prof. S. A. Ariadurai is the Vice Chancellor of The Open University of Sri Lanka and the Co-Chair of AAOU 2021

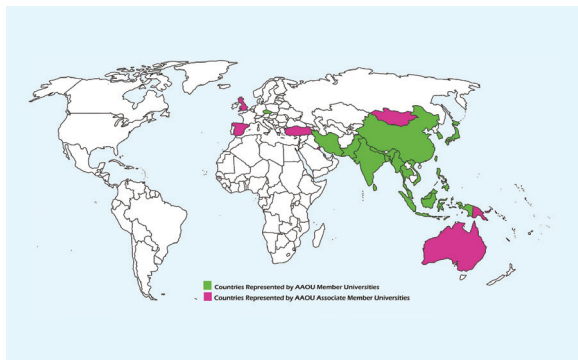


An overview

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only Open and Distance Learning (ODL) national University in Sri Lanka which celebrated 40 years of existence as a progressive and inclusive educational institution in 2020.

In 2021, the 34th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) will be hosted by OUSL from 1st to 3rd June 2021 in Sri Lanka. Initially, this conference was scheduled for 2020. Due to the prevailing pandemic situation, the AAOU conference was rescheduled for 2021 and renamed as AAOU2021. Considering the present health concerns, the first day of the conference will be both an online and an onsite event, whereas the second and third days will be entirely online.

AAOU is a non-profit organization of higher education institutions with more than 45 member universities from Asia, Europe, Canada and Australia under its fold. Thus, more than 200 international participants from Asia and other parts of the world will attend this conference.



The host institution, OUSL, is a progressive institution which has made a remarkable impact on the higher education sector of Sri Lanka adopting the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies. Further, OUSL has been associated with the AAOU from its inception and has been an active contributor to the various activities of the association, including the AAOU Conferences.

Sri Lanka's commitment to host the annual AAOU conference has been made explicit through the support received from various government institutions, including the Sri Lankan Convention Bureau (SLCB) which is the government arm established for the development of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) Industry in Sri Lanka.

What is AAOU?

Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) is a non-profit organization of higher learning institutions founded in 1987. It promotes education by distance teaching systems, as well as professional and ethical standards; develops potentialities of ODL; cooperates with official bodies and others, directly or indirectly interested in ODL; and facilitates cooperation with other similar regional and international bodies. It also strives to widen the educational opportunities available to all people in Asia and to improve the quality of the institutions in terms of their educational management, teaching and research.

At present, AAOU has a total of 61 member institutions, with 46 being Full Members and 15 being Associate Members.

The AAOU Annual Conference, hosted in turn by member institutions provides a focal point for bringing everyone up to date on the issues, ideas and developments in the field of ODL.

Theme of AAOU 2021

The theme of AAOU 2021 is Opening minds for a sustainable future: Re-orienting ODL to surmount challenges. This theme relates to the concept of holistic and transformational education. It addresses the Education 2030 Agenda of UNESCO, which targets Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all through:

[A] Learning content and outcomes that empower informed decisions and responsible actions on critical issues such as climate change, biodiversity, disaster risk reduction

[B] Pedagogy and learning environments that focus on learner-centred teaching enabling exploratory, action oriented and transformative learning

[C] Engagement in learning and promoting core competencies such as critical and systematic thinking, collaborative decision making, and taking responsibility for present and future generations

[D] Empowerment of learners of any age, in any educational context, to transform themselves and the society they live in.

The 34th Annual Conference of AAOU can provide the much-needed forum for Open and Distance educational practitioners, experts and providers to discuss opportunities and challenges, and exchange views and ideas in relation to progression in achieving the goals of ESD.

The sub-themes of this conference were selected to focus and reflect the conference theme and to address the Education 2030 Agenda of UNESCO targeting Goal 4 of the SDG.

Sub Themes of AAOU 2021

- **Promoting sustainable development through lifelong learning**

Increase access and flexibility, improve quality, enhance equity, reorient curricula, facilitate economic growth, social development and environmental protection

- **Innovations in ODL through smart technologies**

e-learning, m-learning, u-learning, digital library, remote access to e-resources, learner- teacher interaction, integration of social media and on-line evaluation

- **Open knowledge movement - implications for ODL**

Open Educational Resources (OER), Open Educational Practices (OEP), MOOCs, Open Data, Social Media and Learning Communities

- **Learner engagement and motivation in ODL - challenges and possibilities**

Enhance retention, increase completion rates, facilitate collaborative learning, redefine role of face-to-face components, harness influence of significant others, reorient student support

- **Best practices in ODL for ESD**

Quality assurance, student support services, ICT integration, policies and procedures, capacity and capability development, innovative learning design and creative teaching practices

- **Learning analytics in ODL: potential and challenges**

As a tool for quality assurance, quality improvement, improve learner support and increase retention rates; ethical issues in the use of learning analytics

The AAOU 2021 Conference will feature panel discussions with the invited keynote speakers who will reflect and expand the conference theme. The invited keynote speakers have been carefully selected to ensure a diverse mix of ideas, perspectives and backgrounds.

Why OUSL for AAOU 2021?

OUSL is the premier ODL institution in Sri Lanka where students can pursue their studies through innovative ODL methodologies. Established in 1980, under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and the OUSL Ordinance No. 1 of 1990, as amended, OUSL is one of the 16 national universities under the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and enjoys the same legal and academic status as the other traditional universities in Sri Lanka. However, it differs from the other national universities because of its dependence on ODL philosophy to expand opportunities for higher education regardless of age, previous qualifications, geography, employment barriers and income. In the year 2020, OUSL celebrated 40 years of excellence in offering higher education to the nation through ODL methodologies.

Due to the nature of its teaching methodology and infrastructure, OUSL is able to serve a large student population spread throughout the country. Currently, there are more than 40,000 students studying at the OUSL, who are being served by 09 Regional Centres and 19 Study Centres located around the country. The University has six Faculties: Natural Sciences, Engineering Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Health Sciences and Faculty of Management Studies.

The OUSL has maintained an excellent collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) for over two decades.

COL is an inter-governmental organisation that has the mandate to promote distance education and open learning. In 1991, OUSL proudly hosted the annual conference of the AAOU as one of the founder members

The regional links fostered in the former years were further enhanced when in 1999 OUSL hosted the First Meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) forum of Vice-Chancellors of Open Universities. This meeting resulted in the formation of the SAARC Consortium for Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL) and thus consolidated ODL links between Sri Lanka and its neighbours in South Asia.

Over the years OUSL has successfully organized numerous international conferences, seminars and meetings including:

Sub Themes

- *Research Review Workshop on ROER4D-Impacts Studies: managed by the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa and the Wawasan Open University (WOU), Malaysia and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada and the UK Department for International Development in 2016*
- *Workshop on ICT Leadership in Higher Education: supported by Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) in 2015*
- *National ODL Policy Roundtable: supported by Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2014*
- *CEMBA/CEMPA Capacity Building Workshop in Open Education Resources (OER): supported by Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2014*
- *Regional Leadership Development workshop for women in Higher Education in Asia in 2013*
- *International Research conference: The Role of Open and Distance Learning in the 21st Century: Challenges and Possibilities in 2010*

- *International Roundtable Conference on Quality Assurance in 2010*
- *SAARC Consortium on Open and Distance Learning (SACODiL): second Meeting of the Board of Governors in 2006*
- *Asian Roundtable on Open and Distance Learning Initiatives for Attainment of Millennium Development Goals in 2005*
- *1st Advisory Committee Meeting on South Asian Consortium for Teacher Education and Development (SACTED) in 2005*



Hosting this range of international conferences over the years has helped OUSL to build up experience and infrastructure to host the AAOU 2021. We have built up a valuable network of, and relationships with organizations that would support and help to promote the this international conference. Further, in 2013, OUSL established the International Relations Unit (IRU) whose mandate includes establishing links with, and networking with, institutions and organisations overseas through organising meetings, conferences and short tours for overseas visitors. IRU played a lead role in organising AAOU2021. It has the capacity to organise an exciting and stimulating conference.



Prof. J. C. N. Rajendra

Prof. J. C. N. Rajendra is the Co-chairperson of AAOU2021. He is also a Senior Professor in Physics and the Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the Open University of Sri Lanka

Introduction

Open Universities have played a key role as higher education institutions for half a century by providing flexible and life-long learning opportunities and promoting openness in education through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. In the current global context, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the unique role of open universities has become even more significant. In response to rapidly changing circumstances in higher education, and in order to face the challenges posed by disruptive forces, open universities need to re-envision their role and emphatically reposition themselves as key drivers of transformational change.

Open, Distance and Flexible Learning - Potentials and Possibilities

The concept of distance education emerged as a 'non-traditional' form of education. It was primarily characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place, yet with the use of multiple media for delivery of instruction to bridge this separation and unite the teacher and learner (Keegan, 1990). Over the years, various forms of teaching and learning have evolved with terminologies such as open learning, flexible learning, online learning, e-learning, blended learning, and distributed learning. Definitional differences aside, all these notions share the common characteristic of having an organized system of educational provision that diminishes the distance between teachers and learners, along with the increased integration of technologies in teaching and learning transactions (Naidu, 2015).

Six key elements of distance education:

- Separation of teacher and learner
- Influence of an educational organization
- Use of media to link teacher and learner
- Two-way exchange of communication
- Learners as individuals rather than grouped
- Educators as an industrialized form

(Keegan, 1980, p. 33)

The combination of two significant concepts - open learning and distance learning, makes Open and Distance Learning (ODL) a unique system. The idea of open learning implies principles and practices of openness in education, based on a philosophy of equity and access to knowledge and

educational opportunities for anyone, where learning can happen anywhere, anytime and from any resource. The combination of these concepts makes ODL the most viable means for widening educational access to diverse groups of learners, enhancing individual opportunity and the pursuit of social justice through education.

An examination of distance education (DE) and ODL from different perspectives has revealed that these two interdisciplinary fields are subject to constant changes catalyzed by technology in significant ways (Bozkurt, 2019).

DE and ODL can be defined as any learning

activities within formal, informal, and

non-formal domains that are facilitated

by information and communication

technologies to lessen distance, both

physically and psychologically, and to

increase interactivity and communication

among learners, learning sources and

facilitators

(Bozkurt, 2019, p. 267)

The potentials and opportunities of ODL are many, including open, flexible, and multiple pathways to learning. This makes it a powerful tool for lifelong learning, especially for adult learners. The Open Universities, 'the most significant innovation in higher education of the late 20th century' (Daniel, 2019), are the key contributors in providing educational opportunities for the masses via ODL.

The Leadership Role of the Open Universities

An “open” university denotes not only the removal of barriers to education, in terms of age, geographic location, gender, ethnicity, economic ability and other ways in which conventional educational systems place barriers to entry. It also denotes flexibility, positing that students should have their own choices in entry and exit points, time, place and pace of learning, selection of courses, as well as learning methods, materials and media. Thus, the openness in open universities can be viewed through different lenses - open as to people, places, methods, and ideas (Daniel, 2019).

Open University programmes must be:

- **affordable to all students**
(open as to people);
- **offered ubiquitously at scale**
(open as to places);
- **well-governed and managed**
(open as to methods); and
- **effective at teaching** (open as to ideas).

(Daniel, 2019, p. 204)

ODL provides a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for learning and supports self-regulated learning because it permits a combination of work and learning, allowing individuals to organize learning around their work and home life. This element of self-directedness is directly connected to a learners’ success in ODL and will equip them with the necessary competencies for lifelong learning. It will also empower them to become more engaged citizens.

Open Universities are also very well-positioned to pursue the goal of serving populations that may not have access to affordable, high quality education.

This would be crucial in meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target of ensuring “equal access for all to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university education” by 2030 (UNESCO, 2018).



The open university model has been truly revolutionary in extending educational boundaries. In the current scenario, it is imperative to revisit and re-consider the unique role of open universities.

An evaluation of the current situation of open universities is summarized below, as a SWOT analysis (Paul & Tait, 2019).

Strengths	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to openness, flexibility, and access. Capacity for large-scale provision. Support for part-time students, working adults. Commitment to technology-enhanced learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World-wide access to the Internet. UN’s sustainable development goals for major expansion of higher education. Use experience to develop quality assurance for mass higher education systems. Trends to international collaboration, open educational resources. International trends to lifelong learning and continuous professional upgrading.
Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion and graduation rates. Reputation and brand. Staff resistance to change. OU model based on very large student-to-staff ratio. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burgeoning mainstream university involvement in online and blended learning. Governmental disenchantment with OU model. Supreme value of elite education. MOOCs and other innovations from mainstream universities.

(Paul & Tait, 2019).

The potentials and opportunities of ODL are many, including open, flexible, and multiple pathways to learning. This makes it a powerful tool for lifelong learning, especially for adult learners.

The Open Universities, ‘the most significant innovation in higher education of the late 20th century’ (Daniel, 2019), are the key contributors in providing educational opportunities for the masses via ODL.

In the early days of the invention of this nontraditional form of education, distance educators walked alone and, on the periphery, and looked in from the back door. Today we have the support of mainstream educational forces and the company of Ivy League institutions which is heartening. A new norm is emerging, and it is opening up access to educational opportunity, as well as learning resources. It is time for us in the field of open, flexible and distance learning to rise up and seize the day and this opportunity -- and based on our track record, to lay claim on the movement to transform education at all levels, not just higher education

(Naidu, 2015, p. 131).

Futureproofing open universities with innovative thinking

Higher education has been deeply disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented challenge has had a significant impact on transforming education. It has compelled educational institutions across the globe to make urgent,

drastic changes in teaching and learning methodologies, forcing them to re-imagine traditional classroom-based learning and transition to an online delivery mode to provide uninterrupted access to education. This is an opportune moment for open universities to reposition and reimagine themselves while also re-strategizing for the future. It is a wake-up call for 'disruptive innovation' with future-focused leadership.

With the emergence of digital and networked learning environments, a blend of diverse technologies and delivery mechanisms are increasingly being created and adopted. Furthermore, novel concepts such as open educational resources (OER) and open educational practices (OEP) promote scholarly practices of openness through the sharing of educational resources and innovative pedagogical practices. These numerous learning options will cater to the variety of learning needs and learning styles of ODL learners.

How can open universities reimagine and reinvent themselves innovatively to meet the educational needs of the present and face the challenges posed by disruptive forces in the future? Some thoughts are shared below for contemplation:

• Flexible Access to Learning Opportunities:

- o Embedding and advancing various dimensions of flexibility to see it in relation to how, and to what extent, flexibility is being integrated in learning and teaching.

- o Enhancing flexible access to learning opportunities via novel strategies with a greater emphasis on developing graduate attributes to fulfill the current need for upskilling and reskilling the workforces.

• Technology-Enhanced Authentic Teaching, Learning and Assessment:

- o Enhancement of technology-enhanced teaching, learning, and assessment practices based on sound pedagogical principles.

- o Adoption of non-conventional pedagogical approaches and moving away from a heavily examination-oriented, teaching-learning process towards a more authentic and meaningful 'learning-centred' processes.

o Re-thinking, re-imagining and re-designing of learning environments, harnessing the affordances of ICT by integrating digital learning practices.

• **Staff Capacity and Capability Development**

o Strategic interventions to cultivate an active and a positive organizational learning culture, encouraging continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning among staff.

• **Effective Learner Support Services**

o Strengthen effective learner-support activities and efficient learner support services with technological integration.

• **Quality Management System**

o Application of Total Quality Management (TQM) as an operating philosophy at open universities to achieve continuous performance improvement with the participation of all stakeholders in enhancing the processes, products, services, and the work culture.

• **Promoting Research and Innovation in ODL**

o Promotion of innovative initiatives and rigorous research on ODL through proactive measures targeting the translation of research into practice and fostering a collaborative research culture.

Driving such transformational changes at open universities require positive shifts in the mindsets of people. This kind of cultural change can be achieved via a 'systems approach' that is goal-directed and evidence-based, taking into consideration all inter-connected parts and processes in these dynamic organizations. The creation of 'communities of practice' will support a culture of cooperation and sharing among all stakeholders, thereby enabling the achievement of the shared mission of open universities.

The Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU), as an organization of higher learning institutions that are primarily concerned with ODL, provides strong collective leadership to widen educational opportunities available to people in Asia, and to promote education through ODL practices, while facilitating collaborative and cooperative initiatives with other similar regional and international bodies. Through this it is well placed to contribute meaningfully to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal agenda by 2030.

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**Prof. Shironica
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Shironica P. Karunanayaka is a Professor in Educational Technology in the Faculty of Education at The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). She has been an academic at OUSL since 1993 and has functioned as Dean/Faculty of Education and Head/Department of Secondary & Tertiary Education. She holds a first class in the Degree of Bachelor of Science from the OUSL, and the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of Wollongong, Australia, specializing in Information Technology in Education and Training. Currently she serves as an Honorary Adviser to Commonwealth of Learning (COL).



The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) recognizes that developing the potential of its academic staff by providing them with adequate opportunities to engage in research would pave path to explore and validate novel ideas in research, innovation, and other intellectual activities. This would, in turn, contribute to national development in the long term. Hence, on the initiative and recommendation of the Vice Chancellor, the OUSL established the Research Division in February 2014 to serve as a vehicle to spearhead its research mandate.

In addition, the Industrial Liaison Centre (ILC) of OUSL was established on 15th December 2014 to encourage to inculcate entrepreneurial activities as a formal mechanism to coordinate industry liaison and commercialization activities. The ILC is now well positioned to help industry collaborators to buildup mutually beneficial relationships with researchers at OUSL.

The OUSL with the support of the Research Division created an environment of innovation of research and education across a broad spectrum of ODL,

science, engineering, social science, management, law, and other areas to foster multidisciplinary discoveries and inventions that arise through the mixing of students, faculty, and researchers across traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Further, Research Division laid the foundation for a high-level research in the university that will help attract, create, and retain local talents within the island. Since The annual Open University research conference (OURS) organized by the Research Division established itself as a high caliber research forum that attracts not only researchers from the OUSL community but also other state universities and higher education institutions, creating a forum for presenting and discussing valuable research findings leading to enriching experiences to the researchers. OURS significantly contributed to enhance the research culture among OUSL staff members in ODL and disciplinary-based research, which directly inspired our staff members to participate at other national and international conferences including AAOU by contributing quality research findings.



Inauguration Session of OURS 2019 - 30th to 31st October 2019

With the introduction of various research grant schemes (Faculty Research Grants, Competitive Research Grants, Innovative Grants Research etc. etc.), Research Allowance, OUSL Research Award scheme, Overseas Travel Grants, the research culture for ODL and discipline-based research of OUSL has been improved gradually.

In addition, last year OUSL developed the "Research funding Policy for OUSL" to enhance the research culture among OUSL staff. This includes Faculty Research Grants, Innovation Grants, Competitive Research Grants, Postgraduate Research Grants, Split-site Postgraduate Scholarships, Postgraduate Research Supplement (Overseas), Postgraduate Research Supplement (Local), Travel Grants Scheme for OUSL staff - For presenting research papers in international conferences and local conferences/research seminars and financial assistance for OUSL undergraduate-research projects. The total annual allocation for all these categories is Rs. 4.8 million.

OUSL had been a Founder member of AAOU since 1987. OUSL academics contributed to AAOU annually, however, the physical participation was not satisfactory at the beginning. With the introduction of various grant schemes and encouragement

of inculcating the research culture at OUSL through OURS, quantity and quality of ODL research and discipline-based research has increased considerably as well as the participation at AAOU and other local/overseas conferences.

With such improvements, OUSL was even fortunate enough to bag Gold and Silver medals at AAOU in 2016, 2017 and 2018.



A Gold Medal Winner at AAOU 2016 - 26th to 28th October 2016, Philippine



Gold and Silver medal winners at AAOU 2017 - 27th to 29th September 2017, Indonesia



Participants and Prize winners at AAOU 2018 - 24th to 26th October, 2018, Vietnam



**Prof. Shyama
R. Weerakoon**

Prof. Shyama Weerakoon graduated from the Uni. of Colombo with a BSc (Special) Degree in Botany. She obtained her PhD in Genetics and Plant Breeding and Post-Doctoral training from the University of Western Australia. She is attached to the Dept. of Botany, OUSL as the Senior Professor of Botany. Prof. Weerakoon is the Director/Research at the Research Unit, OUSL.



The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) commenced its teaching-learning journey in 1980 to serve the entire nation through an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methodology. It did this by taking over the functions of the two already established Distance Education (DE) institutions in the country: External Services Agency (ESA) and Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education (SLIDE) (Kotelawele & Samarasundara, 1987; Raheem, 2010). The philosophy underpinning ODL is to empower underprivileged learners who are scattered across the country with equal access to higher education sans barriers. At that time, there were only seven conventional universities in the country and there were limited opportunities to enter into one of them. Thus, the OUSL was established to address a pressing national need.

During this period many open universities were established especially in the Asian region following the model of the British Open University (OUUK) - (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019). OUUK was established in 1969 and its establishment heralded a new era in distance higher education, challenging long-standing traditions of teaching. OUSL was one of the early adopters of this model (Raheem, 2010). Some of these newly established Asian Open Universities are mega universities which cater to more than 100,000 students (Daniel, 1996). It is likely that they felt the need to have a focal point to discuss issues, ideas and latest developments in the field of ODL.

Consequently, AAOU was established as a non-governmental academic organization dedicated to uplifting Open and Distance Education (ODE) institutions in Asia. OUSL was instrumental in this endeavour as one of the seven founder members.

The inaugural meeting and Conference of AAOU was held on 13th November 1987 in Bangkok and Professor Dayantha Wijesekara represented OUSL as the Vice-Chancellor of OUSL. The seven founder members according to their dates of establishment are given below:

- ***Korea National Open University (KNOU); established in 1972***
- ***Allama Iqbal Open University (ALOU), Pakistan; established in 1974***
- ***Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand; established in 1978***
- ***The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL); established in 1980***
- ***Open University, Japan (OUJ); established in 1983***
- ***Indonesian Open University (UT); established in 1984 and***
- ***Indira Gandhi National Open University; established in 1985 (Siddigui, 2007).***

All these Asian universities mainly used a single technology, print, as the main medium of instruction at that time. OUSL was no exception and demonstrated the First Generation of Distance Education (GDE) featuring characteristics of correspondence teaching using a single technology (Jayatileke & Kulasekera, 2020).

Print

The processing of information was carried out centrally using mainframe computers and these user terminals were only input devices. OUSL is the first university in Sri Lanka to develop an electronic database system to manage its large volume of student records in the late 1980s (Johnson, 1999) and this information was processed using these mainframe computers. The typesetting of course material was also carried out using these "user terminals" connected to the mainframe computers which were housed in a three-roomed unit in the Data Processing Unit (now Information Technology Division - IT) of the OUSL (Figure 1).

The lettering was not appealing and effects like bold, italics and underline could not be used. For the science courses, the printed manuscripts (with spaces for scientific terms) were directly inserted into the electric typewriters and the relevant scientific terms were typed in italics on the allocated spaces (Figure 2). Manuscripts of Sinhala and Tamil course material were typed using manual typewriters. Scientific names were later pasted onto the final manuscripts. The manuscripts were printed in the OUSL Press which commenced printing in 1981 (Kotalawala, 2007).



Figure 1: Mr. Pushpakumara Hettithanthrige, first Data Processing Manager using one of the terminals of the mainframe computers at the main campus in 1980s



Figure 2: Using electric typewriter in 1980s

Subsequently, with the introduction of microcomputers, departments were engaged in course development activities using personal computers (Figure 3) and managed to incorporate the much needed effects.



Figure 3: Honorable Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa at the 10th Anniversary exhibition of OUSL in 1990.

Prof. Dayantha Wijesekera, Vice-Chancellor and Ms. Rani Ponnampereuma, illustrator at the Educational Technology (ET) Division using a microcomputer and a dot matrix printer.

Desktop publishing was introduced through the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), which later became the Department for International Development (DfID) project (1996–1998), along with designed style sheets and updated the already existing manual on-style sheets (Samarawickrama, 1996).

The “OUSL House Style” was also instituted throughout the university to maintain quality standards and to build the brand image of all OUSL courses.

The Desktop Unit was established in the ET Division (now Centre for Educational Technology and Media – CETMe) and later decentralized so faculties would have their own desktop units. Currently, high-end multimedia computers and laptops are used in course design and development activities (Figure 4a-c).



Figure 4a: Desktop Publishing workshop conducted on 15th September 2006. Prof. Lilani Senaratne (top) and Prof. Shyama Weerakoon among the participants and Ms. Geetha Kulasekara as the resource person (bellow).

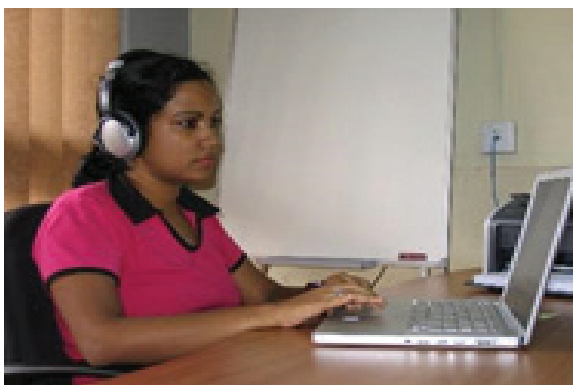


Figure 4b: Ms. Birendra Jayaweera from OUSL-CE Project in 2009



Figure 4c: Workshop on online design and development for members of SAARC countries on 24th-27th September 2013. Prof. G. Bandarage (left) and Prof. Gayathri Jayatilleke (right) as resource persons.

Audio-visual productions

Having considered the importance of educational technology in designing and developing learning resources which is the main component in an ODL institution to transfer knowledge to distance learners, the audio-visual unit was instituted at the inception of OUSL in 1980. The existing audio recording facilities available at the SLIDE were transferred to OUSL and a separate audio recording studio was established in 1983, and a small video recording studio in 1987 (Kotalawala, 2007) – Figure 5.



Figure 5: Mr. Lal Gunawardena; first AV Technical Officer working in the audio-visual unit in 1980s

Subsequently, this unit was gradually expanded with physical and human resources and further strengthened with the construction of a state-of-the-art studio complex with financial assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 1993. It comprises a television studio with three movable cameras, dubbing and audio studios and a post-production unit (Figure 6a-6d). Successively, this studio complex was transformed with hi-definition audio-visual equipment through the assistance provided by the OUSL-CE Project of the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP – 2003-2009) – Figure 6e-6g).



Figure 6d: control room of the Studio Complex in 1993



Figure 6a: control room of the studio complex built with JICA assistance



Figure 6e: Transformation of audio-visual equipment in the studio complex to hi-definition status in 2009



Figure 6b: Main studio of the State-of-the-Art Studio Complex with three movable cameras



Figure 6f: Mr. Vijitha Leelananda demonstrating audio-visual equipment to the SAARC participants



Figure 6c: Outdoor shooting with the camera crew - Dr Buddi Weerasinge former Director/ET as the director, Laxman Samarathunga as the cameraman, M Abeyratne and late Ajith Padmalal (with a camera).



Figure 6g: Setting up lights in the studio by Mr Aruna Chandrasena

Course delivery

Initially, course delivery was supplemented with traditional face-to-face teaching and later additional devices such as overhead projectors and slide projectors (Figure 8a, b and c) were used. Currently, multimedia projectors have replaced these devices.



Figure 8a: eminent media personality Dr. Tissa Abeysekera conducting a script writing workshop without using any visual aids on 30th January 2008



Figure 8b: Using an overhead projector in a day school in 1990s



Figure 8c: Using a slide projector in 1990s

OUSL has gradually embraced emerging technologies from time to time and undergone a series of technological adaptations and innovations through GDE. OUSL has demonstrated the characteristics of the flexible learning model as it entered into the 4th GDE using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and relying mainly on asynchronous technologies. However, using synchronous technologies such as audio and video conferencing in course delivery was limited until the Covid-19 outbreak. During this period, academics were compelled to use Zoom technology or similar synchronous technologies to deliver lectures during the locked down period from March-July 2020. This was needed to mitigate the forced isolation and to motivate learners. Academics mastered the Zoom technology instantly. Both academics and students have been comfortable with Zoom technology for teaching-learning activities and this approach of course delivery may become the mainstream technology in the future.

Progression from 4th AAOU conference to 34th AAOU conference

OUSL proudly hosted the 4th Annual conference of the AAOU from the 17th - 18th September 1991 as one of the founder members of the AAOU under the leadership of the second Vice-Chancellor of the OUSL: Prof. Dayantha Wijesekera. He was elected as the Secretary General in 1990 and was the President-Elect for the year 1994 but had to finish his term as the Vice-Chancellor before 1994. The theme of the conference was "Face-to-Face Components in Distance Education".

This reflected the challenges faced by OUSL at that time, as the only Open University conducting Science and Engineering Technology degree programs purely through ODL and conducting laboratory and field (surveying) work were very much challenging.

Thus, this forum paved the way for deliberations in exploring alternative strategies challenging accepted practices of teacher-centered teaching and humanizing pedagogy at OUSL. Highlights of the event are shown in Figure 9a-9g. As you can see from the photoes, the technologies used in the 4th AAOU conference was very simple. The presenters were mainly talking to the audience with minimum use of visual aids.



Figure 9a: The opening ceremony of the 4th Asian Association of the Open Universities held on 17th - 18th September 1991 at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI)



Figure 9b: Prof. Dayantha Wijesekara, then Vice-Chancellor and the Secretary General of AAOU and President-Elect, Prof. Elsie Kotalawala, Dean Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) and other delegates



Figure 9c: Prof. Dayantha Wijesekara, then Vice-Chancellor and the Secretary General of the AAOU and President-Elect, Vice-Chancellor, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and President University of Air Tokyo



Figure 9d: Part of the Audience First row – Prof. J. N. O. Fernando, Former Dean, Faculty of Natural Sciences Second row – Prof. Asoka Karunananda, Prof. Thusitha Jayasooriya, Prof. Lilani Senaratne and Prof. Uma Coomaraswamy (partly seen)



Figure 9e: Prof. Nalini Ratnasiri, then Dean Faculty of Natural Sciences and D. M. Nanda as the presenter



Figure 9f: Dr. Mahim Mendis as the presenter



Figure 9g: Mr Somasiri de Silva (Registrar-OUSL), Prof Ram Reddy - President Commonwealth of Learning (COL), Professor Dayantha Wijesekara, then Vice-Chancellor and the Member of Board of Governors COL

In 2005, OUSL made a bid to host the 19th Annual AAOU conference in Sri Lanka under the leadership of the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Uma Coomaraswamy. This event was planned to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of OUSL under the theme of "Sustainable Development in the face of Globalization: Challenges before Open and Distance Learning". However, this bid was not successful.

In 2018, the OUSL successfully made a bid to host the 34th AAOU conference in 2020 to coincide with the 40th anniversary celebrations of the OUSL under the direction of Professor Anbahan Ariadurai, the current Vice-Chancellor.

OUSL planned to host the Conference on 21st - 23rd October 2020 as a traditional event at the Cinnamon Grand Hotel, Colombo. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the event had to be postponed to 1st - 3rd June 2021 in the hope that the country's situation would return to normal by that time. However, with the second wave of the Covid-19 outbreak, the Conference had to be rescheduled as a hybrid conference. The planning had to be revisited again with the third wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka and the decision was taken to conduct it as an exclusively virtual event.

Having gone through this uncertain period with repeated alterations, OUSL is confident that it will be able to conduct the 34th AAOU conference virtually as it has a pool of dedicated and experienced staff who underwent a similar experience in November last year. They took up the challenge immediately and switched to conducting the Open University Research Sessions (OURS 2020) in the hybrid mode.

Figure 10 illustrates the enthusiastic team who responded immediately and worked together as a team while adhering to the health guidelines and social distancing.





With the experience gained, we firmly believe that OUSL will undoubtedly aim to fulfill the vision of AAOU in spite of the forced and restrictive environment in which this conference is taking place.

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Prof. B. G. Jayatilleke

Buddhini Gayathri Jayatilleke is a Professor in Educational Technology, currently the Acting Director of the Centre for Educational Technology and Media of the Open University of Sri Lanka and one of the members of the AAOU Organising Committee



On foot

*I had to cross the solar system
before I found the first thread of my red
dress.*

Finish poet Edith Sodergran words offered me a thread of hope as I walked through the most probable space that would host the 33rd AAOU conference—the plush and expansive basement auditorium complex of the Pearl Continental Hotel in Lahore. Truthfully, this was a reconnaissance patrol more than an initiative driven by academic curiosity. A similar event and experience awaited all of us in Sri Lanka one year later...so how would Pakistan face this—Asia's biggest forum for intellectual deliberation and debate on ODL? Still, for all my efforts to locate anything that resembled an academic conference was missing in this space. The muted dignity and sprouting seriousness of a meeting of academics was amiss here. Industrialists thronged the auditorium too mechanized to notice me, the quintessential fly on the wall all the way from Colombo suburbs. Unchallenged I walked in to the main auditorium hoping to see at least a section of an AAOU backdrop surreptitiously tucked away in a corner awaiting sunrise...all to no avail.

Come daylight and this same auditorium complex had transformed itself into something else—it was as if all the industrialists and their paraphernalia have been painted over. The entire basement-auditorium suddenly exuded the sights, smells and sounds of ODL. If the participants were nerdy and eccentric, the setting was graceful and refined. Thus began the most coveted moment in the ODL firmament, the common forum of the Asian Open Universities singing in unison and performing in sync to the trials and contests of teaching and learning. This was 2019 and the world was still a Day School with maximum attendance. Pandemic was a word unborn. Lahore was alive and kicking... and were the proud host of the 33rd AAOU conference. The learning here is that in Pakistan, magic and the mystic always occurred overnight.



As I lost sleep over a paper presentation and managed to reign in my sanity over a lost opportunity to locate and dive into a bookshop, one thought hung over my head like a meteorite with the potential to fall: smooth handover of AAOU from Pakistan to Sri Lanka. To achieve that transference our delegation had 15 minutes towards the end of the closing ceremony. We had to make a significant impact to accept the 34th AAOU conference, and our primary inspiration was the 1996 Cricket World Cup in the Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium.

Pakistani President Dr. Arif Alvi graced grand finale of the conference. His inspiring speech and charisma did arrest out tension as we waited for our great moment in time. Our delegation was small, yet determined and daring. We believed we had the motivation to pull off a dramatic interlude to fire people's imagination to come to AAOU 34 in Sri Lanka.

***Despite the comprehensive security at
the auditorium, our most weapons of
choice were smuggled in—the national
flag, a CD, and our burning hearts. The
time sprinted and there we
were...marching up to the rostrum with
the national and OUSL flag.***



It took only a moment to occupy the left corner of the stage, focusing all our energies in one corner and grabbing all consciousness to us. I thanked Pakistan for a conference of opulence, space, precision and hospitality, and as the jubilant applause rose to a crescendo and ceased I ushered in the Sri Lankan declaration...in an audio-visual narrative, entirely OUSL production.

As timeless poetic verses from the Mayura Sandeshaya

or the Message of the Peacock, filled the air, Sepalika's face invaded the screen thus launching thousand ships from the ancient port of Matota. As the peacock flew across time and space gently unveiling the magic of Lanka and the maturity of OUSL, the momentum, the hearts and the imagination of the auditorium were ours...we have dramatically and gracefully accepted the 34th AAOU conference into our fold. On foot, we have crossed the solar system...



**Lal
Medawattegedara**

Lal Medawattegedara is an award winning author and a lecturer in English at the Department of Language Studies, OUSL.



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