The Promotion of ASEAN Regional Integration Through Open and Distance Higher Education

Alexander G. Flor

Professor, UP Open University, Philippines, aflor@upou.edu.ph

Introduction

The ASEAN Economic Community requires a collective strategy on capacity development that equitably supports a highly competitive and integrated region. This regional strategy must include:

- providing labor-market responsive human development opportunities;
- freeing mobility of skilled workers and professionals across the region; and
- innovating and diversifying deliveries of skill development programs for the marginalized.

Technically, these three concerns may be addressed by Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL) strategies. ODeL, by definition, is inclusive. ODeL programs transcend geographic boundaries and may be made available to learners from all ten countries in the ASEAN Region. Authentic open education is not bound by cumbersome academic traditions and may be nimbly designed to respond to the needs of the current labor market. Furthermore, regionally recognized ODeL certification and degrees will allow mobility among their holders to practice across the region. Additionally, ODeL provides innovative and alternative educational delivery systems for the marginalized such as online learning, blended learning, flipped classes and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). By nature, these options should be industry driven and are thus responsive to labor-markets. Using online delivery systems for capacity development make ODeL innovative and ubiquitous.

Global trends point towards the mainstreaming of ODeL.

The Mainstreaming of ODeL

The ODeL Promise

ODeL is fast becoming the educational system of the future in the developed world. The Open Educational Resources (OER) initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) of major Ivy League institutions demonstrate the promise. A meta-analysis conducted by the US Department of Education that synthesized the findings of over one thousand empirical studies found that online students performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction because of: increased learning time; innovative curriculum and pedagogy; opportunities for collaboration and reflection; and learner control over interactions with the media (Means et al, 2010). In the developed world, quality of ODeL instruction, research and innovation is becoming less of a concern. In Britain, for instance, the UK Open University is ranked as the top third research university in the UK (Research Excellence Framework, 2014). The University of

Nottingham, one of the UK's most prestigious universities, now runs its own open campus, Open Nottingham. In the United States, the University of Michigan has established Open Michigan. As a matter of fact, most residential or mortar and brick institutions of higher learning now possess an eLearning alternative such as an online program, a blended program or flipped classrooms.

In the developing world, the promise of ODeL is founded on a different rationale. For the past fifty years, the international development assistance community – among these, non-government organizations, bilateral agencies, international donors and financial institutions, and UN agencies – have invested heavily on basic education in the Third World. There have been substantive gains in these investments. However, investments on higher education have not been as substantial. Among donors and international funding institutions, the priority assigned or premium attached to higher education is not as much as the priorities assigned or premiums attached to basic education, nonformal education (NFE) and technical vocational education and training (TVET) based on the argument that their potential to lift a country from a state of poverty to growth is much higher.

Hence, higher education infrastructure and capacities have not developed on a pace approximating basic education or TVET. In the meantime, the number of higher education students is estimated to jump more than four times from 94.4 million in 2000 to 414 million in 2030 (Lancrin, 2008; Calderon, 2012). In fact, many countries in the Third World who have made headway in achieving their MDG education targets are now facing absorptive capacity or uptake problems to their higher education system, marginalizing ever increasing numbers of qualified entrants. Calderon (2012) estimates that the East Asia and Pacific region will exceed enrolments of 200 million between 2033 and 2034. He predicts that four ASEAN nations – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam – will belong to the world's top 20 countries in terms of higher education enrollment by 2030.

Under such circumstances, the international education development sector is now looking towards online, open and flexible systems as viable alternatives to mortal and brick higher education institutions.

The Paris Message

In June 2015, 150 academics, education administrators, policy makers, practitioners, and education-sector stakeholders from more than 55 countries convened at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris to address issues of access, equity and quality learning outcomes as key features of the new vision for the post-2015 education agenda. In a stark departure from the millennium development agenda that focused on basic education and its nonformal and technical vocational adjuncts, the participants highlighted the contribution of higher education to the global sustainable development agenda and in supporting the developing world achieve equitable, quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. As a group, they were convinced that higher education, drawing on experiences from online, open and flexible systems, needs to be transformed in order to deliver change in the scale and speed required.

At the end of the three-day high-level global forum, the participants issued The Paris Message, a global call to immediate action for governments, higher education institutions and intergovernmental organizations to, among other things:

- recognize the importance of online, open and flexible systems to meet the challenge of scale and quality in the provision of higher education and lifelong learning for the period 2015-2030;
- create effective policies and enable regulations for online, open and flexible systems at all levels based on equity principles;
- give priority to the use of new pedagogical approaches using digital affordances;
- reform the curriculum to ensure student engagement and success;
- be encouraged to create, develop, adapt and share high quality accessible digital resources, taking into account local needs and diversity of learners; and
- promote North-South-South collaboration in Online, Open, Flexible Higher Education.

The Paris Message informs the framework of this scoping study.

The Focus on Higher Education

The developments described above have offered two rationales for the focus on higher education.

Firstly, higher education needs to prepare for the large uptake of entrants brought about by successes in achieving MDG2 (the universalization of primary education) and scaled-up investments in basic education development across the developing world including eight out of the ten ASEAN countries.

Secondly, the Paris Message highlights the need for open, online, flexible systems for higher education.

A third rationale pertains to the nature of ODeL itself. Open education prescribes a constructivist approach to learning. It encourages independent or autonomous learning while putting much premium on metacognitive goals. This approach is more appropriate to higher education than to basic education. Similarly, distance education provides limited opportunities for technical and vocational practicum. Hence, ODeL may not be the mode of choice for TVET.

These limitations of ODeL have little to do with culture, economics or geography. Nevertheless, we have to shift from the global to the regional since this scoping study is being conducted within the context of ASEAN Integration.

The Education Dimension of ASEAN Integration

The term ASEAN Integration refers to the initiation, at the end of 2015, of the ASEAN Economic Community or AEC (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The AEC is one of three pillars of the ASEAN Community, the two others being, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Hence, ASEAN community building encompasses: enhancing competitiveness for economic growth and development through closer economic integration; nurturing human, cultural and natural resources for sustained development in a harmonious and people-centered ASEAN; and enhancing peace, stability, democracy and prosperity in the region through comprehensive political and security cooperation (Mamat, 2015).

Article 1, Paragraph 10 of the ASEAN Charter states that the Association intends to "develop human resources through closer cooperation in education and life-long learning, and in science and technology, for the empowerment of the peoples of ASEAN and for the strengthening of the ASEAN Community." Let us repeat the phrase for emphasis: Education and lifelong learning… for the strengthening of the ASEAN Community. This statement highlights the original intent of the Association to employ education in the service not only of ASEAN Economic Integration but of all three pillars of the ASEAN Community.

ASEAN higher education has three priorities: mobility; harmonization; and capacity building (Mamat, 2015; Sirat et al., 2014). Concrete measures have been taken to address these priorities. In terms of mobility, faculty and student exchanges have been initiated andbilateral and sub-regional arrangements have been established such as mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) for engineering, architecture, accountancy, surveying, nursing, medicine and tourism. In terms of capacity building, intra-ASEAN, bilateral and multilateral programs have been initiated. In terms of harmonization, an ASEAN Qualifications Referencing Framework is currently being processed for implementation in 2018, with the following thrusts: harmonization; quality; and recognition (Mamat, 2015).

Another thrust that the ASEAN Secretariat has emphasized is ASEAN Connectivity. Among all the educational programs and platforms available in the ASEAN region, ODeL is uniquely suited to contribute to: physical connectivity; institutional connectivity; and people to people connectivity for obvious reasons.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Model

Given the above, our research framework should be guided by the current discourse on: the mainstreaming of ODeL; the focus on higher education; and the education dimension of ASEAN Integration. As these phenomena are still in the process of consummation, our framework should be anticipatory and our inquiry should take on the nature of futures research.

The elements of the framework should include the major concerns on ODeL embedded in the Paris Message, i.e. access, equity, and quality learning outcomes. Added to this list is a concern that may be characteristic to Asian countries, the acceptability of ODeL.

Propositions and Constituent Concepts

The framework's main propositions are:

1. ODeL is in the process of being mainstreamed into ASEAN higher education.

2. ODeL may lead to ASEAN Integration.

   However, ASEAN Economic Integration is merely one of three pillars of the ASEAN Community, the two others being the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) and the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). Thus, we consider Integration as a step

towards ASEAN Community Building. Moreover, ODeL contributes to Integration by way of ASEAN Higher Education, the features of which are: mobility; harmonization; and capacity development.

3. There are factors that influence the impact of ODeL on ASEAN Integration and subsequently to community building. These factors are acceptability, accessibility, equity, and quality of outcomes.

    Under acceptability, we may classify; the demand for cross-border or trans-border ODeL among ASEAN nationals; the recognition of ODeL programs and credentials within and among ASEAN countries; and the existing initiatives towards an ASEAN Qualifications Referencing Framework.

    Under accessibility, we categorize the availability of programs, the availability of telecommunications infrastructure, the absorptive capacities of programs, and the openness of educational resources.

    Under equity, we include the openness of programs and the targeting of marginalized communities, sectors and nationalities.

    Under quality of outcomes, we enumerate the quality of content, pedagogy, and assessment.

    These are the constituent concepts of the proposed research framework on the study of ASEAN Integration through open and distance higher education, some of which will be covered rudimentarily in this scoping exercise to start off our continuing regional conversation.

Policy Implications

From the policy statement generated by the Delphi exercise, individual comments of the national research collaborators and resource persons of the Regional Policy Forum, and discussions on related initiatives found in the body of this report, we arrive at a list of discursive points, a set of policy recommendations that UNESCO, SEAMEO and other ASEAN education stakeholders may wish to pursue and elevate to a higher institutional level of discussion. These recommendations are classified as regional and local/national.

ODeL for ASEAN Community Building

The official status of distance education programs, in general, and ODeL programs for higher education, in particular, is regionally undefined. Six ASEAN countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and VietNam - have fully-established nationally and internationally recognized open universities. However, there is no ASEAN-wide policy pronouncement on the mainstreaming of ODeL. An active ASEAN advocacy for employing ODeL for the regional integration of the workforce has not yet been tabled.

A regional policy originating from the ASEAN Education Ministers to develop ODeL programs for ASEAN Community Building should be formulated. This policy should include the provision of developing regional content without sacrificing local content. ASEANization themes should be infused into this content using the curriculum perspective approach. The policy should capitalize on the fact that ODeL with its regional reach is uniquely suited to promote the ASEAN motto: One Vision, One Identity, One Community.

ODeL Consortium Policy

The Delphi Panel recommended an ODeL Consortium policy covering ASEAN higher education. This was echoed during the deliberations of the Regional Policy Forum.

The Consortium policy should cover course content, cross enrollments, joint offerings, credit transfer, pedagogy and standards. It should address the diversity of language instruction since we do not have a common ASEAN language. For cross-enrollment, language can be an issue among universities which do not use English as a medium of instruction.

Cross Border Higher Education Policy

Over the last two decades, cross-border higher education through student, academic staff, and professional mobility has grown considerably. In parallel, new cross-border providers and delivery modes have appeared, such as profit-oriented providers, satellite campuses abroad, and distance education. These new forms of cross-border delivery of higher education provide new opportunities and increase the possibilities for the improvement of the skills of individual students and the quality of national higher education systems, provided that they are managed appropriately in order to benefit the human, social, and economic development of the receiving country. There should now be a regional policy that addresses mobility of professionals and harmonization of qualifications.

Harmonization of qualifications should follow the existing ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) to address any credit transfer issues. The process of harmonization of credentials will require integration at the regional level. Apart from the Revised Convention 2011, de facto accreditation and degree recognition mechanisms exist on an institution-to-institution basis across ASEAN.

As discussed in earlier chapters, a concept paper for an ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework or AQRF was presented in October 2012. The design for an AQRF was formally endorsed by ASEAN Economic Ministers during the 46th AEM meeting in 25th August 2014 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. Subsequently, the ASEAN Education Ministers endorsed the AQRF on September 11, 2014 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. Although this year, an AQRF Board was established, it will not be until 2018 when actual qualifications referencing processes will be introduced regionally. Thus, 2018 will be the landmark year for the implementation of a regional quality assurance framework covering higher education as well. Hence, quality standards still differ from country to country within ASEAN.

However, there are isolated cases of formal regional accreditation such as the ASEAN Studies Master's Program of the Southeast Asian members of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). Furthermore, the UNESCO Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas

and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific may provide a starting point and a solid foundation to devise ODeL-based higher education with regionally agreed recognition, accreditation, and a quality assurance framework within the ASEAN region.

Regional Access Policy

There should be a regional policy that addresses limitations to equal access. Within ASEAN exists international and intranational disparities in resources? In ODeL access is often equated with bandwidth and infrastructure. However, there may be other considerations such as open educational resources versus intellectual property rights.

A National Policy on ODL

The panel felt that national education systems should formulate national policies that specify the role of open and distance learning in developing human resources across sectors. National governments should be cognizant of the potential of ODL in fulfilling the fundamental right to learn and the need to incorporate it within the framework of human resource development.

Policy on Transnational Education

National policymakers should accommodate transnational course offerings and degree certifications. Under ASEAN integration, human resource development and capacity building are areas of cooperation. National policies on credit transfer, accreditation system, qualifications framework and quality assurance guidelines, among others, should be put in place.

However, national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications in many countries are not geared to addressing the quality of cross-border and private for- profit provision. The challenge for the current quality assurance and accreditation systems is to develop appropriate procedures and systems to cover foreign providers and programs in addition to national providers and programs in order to maximize the benefits and limit the potential downsides of the internationalization of higher education. At the same time, the increase in cross-border student, academic staff, researcher and professional mobility has put the issue of recognition of academic and professional qualifications high on the international agenda.

There is a need for additional national initiatives, strengthened international co-operation and networking, and more transparent information on quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications procedures and systems. These initiatives should have a global range and put emphasis on supporting the needs of developing countries in the process of establishing robust higher education systems. Given that some countries lack comprehensive frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, capacity building will need to form an important part of the overall strengthening and co-ordination of national and international initiatives.

Policy Against Commercialization of ODL

The profit motive should not be the driver for ODL services. Some traditional universities are viewing ODL, in general, and MOOCs, in particular, as an alternate source of revenue generation. Particular attention should be paid to the objectives and intention of education resource providers in terms of whether these resources are an economic product solely for financial gain. Although

legitimate income generation should be accommodated, platforms should not encourage the commercialization of open and distance higher education. At the national level, policies on ODeL, if any, tend to promote national advantage instead of regional competitiveness. ODeL programs offered in one country may undermine the economic gain of another by presenting alternative educational opportunities to the latter's nationals and siphoning potential income. The policy should be able to filter out these transnational programs that serve commercialization purposes rather than integration purposes.

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