

A Platform for Virtual Research and Research Training for Asia

Santosh Panda, Felix Librero & B. Bbatpurev
Indira Gandhi National Open University, India
University of Philippines Open University, Los Banos, Philippines
InfoCon, Mongolia

Abstract

There has been considerable progress in student enrolment, course development, and the use of multiple-media based distance learning technologies in many distance teaching institutions in the Asian region. The distance education operations, like any other educational provision, need to be informed by research. In the absence of this, the tremendous quantitative expansion of the distance teaching institutions is questioned regarding claimed best practices and the quality of the student benefit and output. Many institutions in the Asian region have vague research and development policies and do not have research output as much as that of their conventional counterparts. The distance teaching institutions by necessity need to give more stress on research on DLTs and teaching the discipline-courses through DLT for which significant research and development (R&D) activities are required. In the absence of this, most of decision-making for policy and practice in those institutions is based on experience and critical introspection rather than ground realities and learner perception, needs and satisfaction. Further, many faculty across the Asian region find it hard to collaborate on distance education research in the absence of such mechanisms at a distance and due to lack of research training and research resources. It is ironic that while on the one hand there is tremendous development in DLTs including online education, research on DE is very scanty, and mechanisms of research training including researching online are almost non-existent.

Therefore, there is a need to develop a mechanism that can provide a research environment for researching online, for global collaboration in research in DE, for doing doctoral work at a distance, for providing research training and research resources online, and for transforming research into development. The present paper describes the

initiation of a research study aiming at developing an online/virtual research platform for Asian DE researchers which can provide for online resources, tools, methodologies, research questions and problems, mechanisms for research collaboration, and researching online and training for online research. The project is funded by the IDRC's PAN-DLT (Asia): Networking Distance Learning Technology Engines for Research, and is undertaken by three country collaboration (India, The Philippines and Mongolia) and is being carried out during 2005-2007

The research study is largely developmental in nature, with built-in surveys and try-outs conducted at three stages/outputs of the project. While surveys are to be conducted to locate and examine online research resource sites, tools, databases, and other online learning platforms; the research platform, research environment, and research training resources shall be developed, and tried out for feasibility, ease of handling, perceived gain and suggestions for further improvement.

Introduction

Most of the distance teaching institutions in the Asian region have progressed tremendously in multiple-media based distance learning technologies, and have shown tremendous growth in terms of student enrolment, course development models, course choice in diversified areas, institutional networking and collaboration, and cross-border operations. Some of them have adopted computer-mediated communication and online learning technologies for effective course delivery, learner support and student learning. While these distance education operations, like any other educational provisions, need to be informed by research, the tremendous quantitative expansion of these distance teaching institutions is questioned due lack of research evidences regarding claimed best practices and the quality of the student learning and institutional outputs. Many institutions in the Asian region have vague research and development policies and do not have research outputs as much as those of their conventional counterparts. Unlike the conventional universities where discipline-based research is the mainstay of scholarship and institutional credibility, the distance teaching institutions, by necessity, need to give more stress on research in DLTs and teaching the discipline-courses through the DLTs for which significant research and development (R&D) activities are required. In the absence of this, most of decision-making for policy and practice in those institutions is based on experience and critical introspection rather than ground realities and learner perception, needs and satisfaction. It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the DLT practices in the Asian region are based on adoption of models from other, especially western, counterparts; and, therefore, much of their progress and quality of instruction is at stake.

Further, most of the teachers and academics from the distance teaching institutions across the Asian region find it hard to collaborate on distance education research in the absence of

such mechanisms at a distance and due to lack of research training and research training resources. It is ironic that while on the one hand there is tremendous development in DLTs including online education, research on DE is very scanty, and mechanisms of research training including researching online are almost non-existent. Except the research courses within the masters in distance education programmes offered by the Athabasca University (Canada), Deakin University (Australia), Indira Gandhi National Open University (India), U.K. Open University (UK), University of London (UK), and others, we do not have full research resources and strategies in place for facilitating the DE faculty and other professional staff to conduct institutional and action research. This situation also applies to doctoral research at a distance. Therefore, there is a need to develop a mechanism that can provide a research environment for researching online, for global collaboration in research in DE, for doing doctoral work at a distance, for providing research training and research resources online, and transforming research into development. The DE research training resources developed by the International Research Foundation for Open Learning, with support received from the Commonwealth of Learning, are available in print (and are very useful and handy to the researchers in and beyond the Commonwealth countries). There is an urgent need of such mechanisms and resources for the distance education institutions of the Asian region to improve the quality of student learning based on learning styles of Asian learners. These research environments and resources could be made available online which could provide further possibilities in both online research and research training, as also reinforce training in online learning and online course delivery.

There are significant research reports on the state of DE research in Asia that are available in print, and research priorities are in place. The reviews conducted by David Murphy (on DE research in Asia), Olugbemiro Jegede (on DE research in the developing countries), Santosh Panda (on DE research in India), K. Murli Manohar (on DE in India) and others are indicative of the research interest in the region, as also of urgent research needs required for effective institutional planning, quality assurance, and learner satisfaction and effective student learning. We need to seriously reconsider, based on research evidences, how do students learn, how can learning resources and learner support be geared to address the issues of gender, culture, and access and equity, and how best can blended technologies be designed and deployed to address educational and training needs of learners at various levels of formal and non-formal areas.

The present paper describes the initiation of a research study aiming at developing an online/virtual research platform for Asian DE researchers which can provide for online resources, tools, methodologies, research questions and problems, mechanisms for research collaboration, and researching online and training for online research. The project is funded by the IDRC's PAN-DLT (Asia): Networking Distance Learning Technology Engines for Research, and is being

carried out during 2005-2007 by three country collaboration (India, The Philippines and Mongolia).

Objectives

The present study intends to achieve the following nine objectives:

1. To develop an online/virtual research platform for Asian DE researchers which can provide for online resources, tools, methodologies, research questions and problems, and mechanisms for research collaboration.
2. To develop the research environment for collaborative research, research mentoring, research training, and for doctoral and allied research.
3. To review existing research training resources for distance education research; and based on this, develop and make available research resources for research training so as to enable faculty and a host of other personnel to do research in a variety of areas of DLTs.
4. To provide for short term research training online, as also training for online research.
5. To develop research problems and research questions in a few most significant and core areas with appropriate research methodology, and throw open for discussion, critical reflection, contribution and further expansion so as to dynamically run such a virtual research environment.
6. Develop collaborative groups of researchers, and study the dynamics of online research collaboration so as to dynamically improve it from time to time.
7. To review existing databases, repositories and information networks on research tools, experts, and previous classified research studies on DLTs, and link the research environment to such sites for facilitating online research in DLTs.
8. To draw policy guidelines for institutional research, and suggest benchmarks and standards for collaborative virtual research and research training.
9. To tryout the environment, and make available through the PAN-DLT main site.

Methodology

Research Design

The present research is largely developmental in nature, with built-in surveys and try-outs conducted at three stages/outputs of the project. While surveys will be conducted to locate and examine online research resource sites, tools, databases, and other online learning platforms; the research platform, research environment, and research training resources shall be developed, and tried out for feasibility, ease of handling, perceived gain and suggestions for further improvement.

Sample

The sample for the site surveys will include such sites as are related to the project objectives of this research. The try-out sample (about 50 distance teachers/trainers/researchers) shall be drawn from the Asian distance teaching institutions particularly (as also some experts from other countries/institutions); and the environment and resources shall be critically commented from time to time and be evaluated towards the end of the completion of the first prototype of the online/virtual research environment.

Tools

Schedules and questionnaires and evaluation tools shall be developed as per the parameters required by the objectives of the study, and validated through critical comments obtained from experts in this area.

Procedure

Based the survey of existing sites and resources, and as per the objectives of this research, the online research platform shall be designed and established using the open source software. While IGNOU shall provide web site spaces for this work, the development of the platform shall be executed by the project partner from Mongolia. Simultaneous survey, consultation and scrutiny of existing resources, online learning environments, and the needs of faculty and other researchers on such an environment and its requirements shall be undertaken by the project partners from India and Philippines. On completion of the online platform, the online/virtual research environment shall be developed by the project leader along with the help and advice received from the international consultant. During the process, the existing online research training resources, if any, shall be identified and examined. The process of developing such resources in selected areas of DE research shall be developed by both the project partners and international consultancy. Links to online research repositories and information networks of tools, techniques, research experts, classified research publications shall be designed and provided. Once the research environment is developed, some research problems will be designed along with appropriate methodologies and links to research repositories, and actual experimentation shall take place on collaborative online research, its dynamics, nature of mentoring and the like so as to locate its dynamics and improve upon the environment. The research training resources shall also be similarly tried out on a sample of distance teachers and researchers across Asian (and other countries) for its developmental testing and further modifications. The final-but-pilot version of the environment shall be tried out on similar groups of teachers and researchers (as also DE experts for expert comments) to improve upon, and throw the whole environment at the PAN-DLT site for wider use.

Output

Five types of deliverables are visualized briefly noted as follows:

1. An online/virtual research platform with all the dynamics and facilitating mechanisms noted above.
2. A fully designed and developed online/virtual research environment with mechanisms for collaborative exploration, research mentoring, doctoral and allied research, research training online and training for online research.
3. Research training resources in selected areas of DLTs like course design and development, media selection and integration, learner support, assessment and evaluation, funding and costing, planning and management, online research and the like with a detailed review of previous studies, further research possibilities and needs, analysis of appropriate research tools and techniques, and links to research resources.
4. Links to online research repositories and information networks comprising data on research experts, active researchers with specialization, and available research resources. The links could be with the database sites of CRIDAL, COL, ICDL, and such other databases.
5. Final tryout and making available the revised site at that of PAN-DLT along with policy guidelines for institutional research, and benchmarks and standards for collaborative virtual research and research training.

At this stage, progress has been made with regard to choice of the open source software for developing the virtual research platform, and the variables of the dynamics of virtual research process and collaboration have been identified which will facilitate the design of the virtual research environment. Once developed the VRE shall be available at the PANdora site for wider use and adaptation under 'creative commons'.