

Perspectives of Open and Distance Learning in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper deals with the present situation of distance education implemented in Myanmar, particularly the role of distance education system in higher education sector. It presents how Myanmar is trying to enhance ODL in terms of technology, quality assurance and partnership. It focuses on how Universities of Distance Education in Myanmar make use of advanced technologies to increase the development of ODL (e-learning, m-learning and technology-enhanced learning). To facilitate distance learning, Satellite Data Broadcasting System is utilized to transmit the educational programmes to learning centres located at higher education institutions, education colleges and basic education high schools all over Myanmar. Educational resources cover printed materials, radio, audiotapes, videotapes, broadcasting from Television channels and live teaching from Electronic Data Broadcasting System (e-DBS) studio. The degrees offered from Universities of Distance Education are accredited by international universities and institutions and the standard guidelines for quality provision in Myanmar distance education are still being arranged. Collaboration between existing universities and international institutions needs to be enhanced.

Keywords: ODL, quality assurance, partnership

Introduction

Higher education institutions in Myanmar are reinforcing their role as a centre for creating and disseminating knowledge in the local community. They are defining the services, skills and knowledge that they could provide to rural areas and the community in which they are located and strengthen linkages with local and rural communities and contribute to their development. They are able to harness technology to act as a driving force in the delivery of knowledge and skills. They also carry out research on local resources and identify educational programmes they can offer using the networks of learning centres and other means available. Community-based human resource development is being activated in order to buttress development of the local resident's lifelong learning and promote the growth of local industries.

Like other countries of the world, Myanmar realizes that conventional education alone cannot cope with all the demands of education and training. In this new millennium 21st Century, through new and flexible approaches, open and distance learning will play a bigger and more important role in developing human resources across sectors.

Present Status of Higher Education

The Ministry of Education is the main provider of education in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and is functioning with the vision to create an education system that will generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the knowledge age. The Ministry of Education is implementing short-term and long-term education development plans to upgrade the education standard and to develop a lifelong learning society. The implementation of the education development plan has not only brought about the enhancement of the quality of higher education for a wide diversity, but it has also markedly increased accessibility to both basic and higher education.

There are 163 higher education institutions in Myanmar. Among them 66 institutions are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education while 97 institutions are under 12 other ministries. All the higher education institutions are state-financed and they offer various courses on arts and science, law, economics and business education, teacher education, foreign languages, engineering, computer studies, maritime studies, defence, agriculture, forestry, medicine, nursing, veterinary science, culture and fine arts, etc. and offer a variety of programmes – undergraduate, postgraduate diploma, master’s degree and doctorate programmes. Higher education institutions under the Ministry of Education have also established Centres for Human Resource Development that offer re-education and retraining human resource development programmes ranging from short-term certificate programmes to master degree programmes.

Universities of Distance Education

The distance learning for higher education in Myanmar started from 1970s. The University Correspondence Courses (UCC), affiliated to Yangon University was initiated in 1975-76 academic year and bachelor degrees of Arts, Science, Economics, and Law were offered. In 1980 it was separately organised under the direct control of the Ministry of Education. At that time the teaching-learning process was based on printed materials and radio lessons. In addition, every student needs to submit 16 assignments for each course. At the end of the academic year, students had to sit for the final examination.

UCC was upgraded to University of Distance Education (Yangon) on 9th July, 1992. It was named as Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) in 1998. YUDE is responsible for 14 regional branches, which are affiliated to existing universities in Lower Myanmar. Another university of distance education, Mandalay University of Distance Education (MUDE), which was established in 1998, is responsible for 18 regional branches in Upper Myanmar. Through these regional branches educational as well as administrative and managerial matters are carried out. The main purpose of the establishment of two universities of distance education is to provide access to higher education to those who are unable to pursue it at conventional institutions for various reasons.

The objectives of the University of Distance Education in line with the educational objectives are:

- to make higher education accessible to all students at minimal cost and without having to leave their homes or jobs.

- to offer courses of higher education to all within the country including those residing in border areas.
- to ensure a high standard of tertiary education to be at par with courses offered at other institutions.
- to produce through a higher education programme, qualified citizens who will be able to serve better in the interest of the state and to equip them with the ability to carry out effectively all tasks given them by the state

Universities of Distance Education implement to fulfill the above objectives. Nearly 60 % of the matriculated students joined the UDE every academic year. The total number of undergraduate and postgraduate students at universities and degree colleges under the Ministry of Education in 2012 academic year is shown in Table 1. Under the education development plans, new specializations – English, Oriental Studies, Myanmar Studies, Creative Writing, Public Policy, Home Economics, and Business Management- were introduced at the distance education universities in addition to the existing 12 disciplines- Myanmar, Geography, History, Philosophy, Psychology, Law, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Zoology, Botany, and Economics. This raised the number of disciplines being offered to 19, thereby advancing the Universities of Distance Education’s efforts to be more flexible, responsive and open.

Table 1. Number of undergraduate and postgraduate students at Universities and Degree Colleges in 2012

Sr. No.	Course	No. of Students		
		Male	Female	Total
1	Undergraduate Degree	58469	109748	168217
2	Honours Degree	981	5573	6554
3	MA/MSc Qualifying	148	897	1045
4	Postgraduate Diploma	459	1266	1725
5	Master	1291	5333	6624
6	Master of Research	64	386	450
7	PhD	394	1659	2053
	Total	61806	124862	186668
8	Distance Education (Undergraduate Degree)	125986	158258	284244
	Grand Total	187,792	283,120	470,912

Source: Department of Higher Education (Lower Myanmar), MOE as of 31 May, 2012

Within a set of criteria set by the Higher Education Department, the students can take up any course of study. However, in the science disciplines there is a limit for the intake, due to the constraints of laboratory facilities in respective regional university. As an outcome of the workshop on upgrading the quality of education sector held by Ministry of Education, the 3-year degree courses will be expanded to 4-year degree courses by adding one more academic year in all universities and colleges including UDE. Like other higher education institutions, the

credit system was also practised at the UDE to facilitate students who transfer from conventional institutions to UDE and vice-versa.

Distance learning started with simple means – textbooks, study guides and assignments – to provide education to students. The main mode of delivering courses included printed materials, lab, assignments and intensive classes held before examination. Students have to join the respective university they have attached for laboratory and final examination.

More than 85 % of intake students successfully completed their course studies. Module system is practised to assess students’ performance on the basis of the credit-point system. Each academic term has an examination. Those who get high grades can pursue postgraduate studies at conventional universities. The total number of graduates from UDE is mentioned in Table 2.

Table 2. The total number of undergraduates from UDEs

Sr.N0.	Academic Year	YUDE	MUDE	TOTAL
1	1991-92	1006	0	1006
2	1993	19447	0	19447
3	1993-94	28352	0	28352
4	1994-95	21243	0	21243
5	1995	31987	0	31987
6	1996-97	25076	0	25076
7	1998-99	17838	16210	34048
8	1999-2000	29957	22467	52424
9	2001	35096	22358	57454
10	2002	72168	46327	118495
11	2002-2003	28620	25004	53624
12	2003	33578	27512	61090
13	2003-2004	37283	32017	69300
14	2004	38833	40277	79110
15	2005	44298	35163	79461
16	2006	33075	18812	51887
17	2007	29297	23380	52677
18	2008	35872	25766	61638
19	2009	32164	29556	61720
20	2010	27274	27023	54297
21	2011	32150	26533	58683
	Total	654614	418405	1073019

Source : Academic Department of YUDE ,31-8-2012.

Recently, students transferred from other Colleges and Universities increasingly impact on the Universities of Distance Education. Now we have a long-term plan that will expedite the expansion of the distance learning system and transform it into an open university, to create new teaching program, to provide both program leading to degrees.

Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) now offers a ten-month course, “**Online Diploma in Law**” under Human Resources Development Program. A person taking the online legal course has to submit assignments, take tutorials and examinations and must have some academic criteria so as to get the diploma certificate. The online law course includes weekly discussions in the evenings on every Tuesday and Thursday. The advantage of this online course is to develop a lifelong learning society and to enhance the quality of legal education. This online program is expected to be better and successful due to the introduction of diploma in law through electronic media in Myanmar.

Use of Advanced Technologies

One of the 12 visions of the Long-term 30-year Education Development Plan relating to utilizing of technology is 'To create an academic environment that is endowed with dynamic knowledge and will emerge according to the times.'

Today, UDEs can harness a variety of means including sophisticated technology to enhance instruction and provide greater services. To facilitate student learning, a studio has been established to transmit distance education programmes through a separate channel. Satellite Data Broadcasting System is utilized to transmit the programmes from the studio to learning centres located at higher education institutions, education colleges and basic education high schools all over Myanmar, so that distance education students can view the programmes at the centre most convenient to them. Nowadays there is a total number of 624 learning centres all over Myanmar. Distance learning lets students have access to higher education through various educational resources. Educational resources cover printed materials, radio, audiotapes, videotapes, broadcasting from Television channels and live teaching from Electronic Data Broadcasting System (e-DBS) studio. They can earn a Bachelor of Science or Arts degrees. Without constraint of distance and time, instruction can be delivered. Thus, distance learning can provide students with educational opportunities for students who do not have enough time and favourable conditions to attend conventional institutions.

Throughout the course, doing assignments play an essential role in their learning process as it is part of the course for UDE students. Self-study is required to deal with these assignment questions. Timing and type of the assignment may dictate the analytical goals.

With the help of advanced technology, students of UDE can easily cope with various types of instructional materials such as video and audio clip. But there is still an existence of challenge for some learners of distance education to use ICT as ICT is not accessible in many places and it is relatively expensive there.

ODL Quality Assurance

How to design and deliver high quality program in distance education environments is a critical issue in Myanmar, for the process of distance learning course is rather complicated. To have quality assurance in open and distance learning, the relationship among teachers, students or learners, and educational resources is a major challenge. The successful

distance learning course would depend on systematic management of the whole process of distance learning.

The distance learning environment requires self-regulated students. Attitudes and interests toward the course are crucial to create a successful learning environment in distance learning. Teachers and instructors need to use effective teaching methods and strategies for distance courses. These methods should meet learners' needs, and content requirements. Symposiums are held annually to draw up standard guidelines for quality provision in Myanmar distance education. Experts have been trying to operate the external quality assurance as well as internal quality assurance. In enhancing quality assurance of universities, closely related departments will be organized as faculty so that academic structures of universities in Myanmar will become similar to those of overseas institutions and as a result, more exchange programmes can be launched successfully. Moreover, goals and norms for quality assurance will be set so that external quality assessment agencies can assess the quality assurance of universities using these goals and norms.

Partnership in ODL among Southeast Asian Nations

So far, distance learning programme in Myanmar has not been in partnership with any Southeast Asian nations. Myanmar is still trying to enhance collaboration between existing universities and international institutions. In order to expand collaboration with international universities, direct collaborations with international universities and academic institutions will be made by local universities by means of forming partner universities and establishing international relation centres.

Conclusion

To sum up, to upgrade the standard of distance learning to the ASEAN universities' level and produce highly qualified and internationally recognized graduates for the society, Myanmar is trying -

- to conduct high quality teaching -learning process, to develop teaching -learning process systematically, to generate and disseminate new knowledge
- to strive towards academic excellence
- to produce competent graduates (who are able to make use of knowledge and skills gained from distance learning)
- to shape our students into independent-minded graduates (Free and vibrant academic culture)
- to take responsibility for both business sector and civil society

- to equip the students with adequate teaching aids (books, libraries, library apparatus, the Internet) and supervise them for effective use

To achieve the goals mentioned above, the degrees offered by Universities of Distance Education need to be accredited by international universities and institutions and students need to acquire knowledge and skills applicable to practicable fields. Open and distance learning is a probable means of supporting attainment of academic development with the present changing society of Myanmar. Improving open and distance education and achieving higher education are strong priorities for the people due to the related prospective for modernization. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to transmit and receive various materials through voice, video and data are called for advancement in higher distance learning in Myanmar.

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