

# Open and Distance Education Policy Briefing



INTERNATIONAL  
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND  
DISTANCE EDUCATION



## Policy Briefing Overview

- Globalisation and the imperatives of the networked society are affecting higher education almost everywhere in the world.
- Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of higher education and training globally.
- Open and distance learning may be the only way of meeting the growth and participation objectives of governments the world over, and anticipated future student demands for flexible learning opportunities.
- The rapid uptake of open and distance learning and the forecast continued growth as a key form of higher education delivery highlights different aspects of the open and distance learning experience and requires consideration in regulatory and policy decisions.
- The rapid development of ICT has been a driving force behind major changes in the world economy and the emergence of more open, knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalised societies.
- Advances in ICT continue to create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education and reinforce the trend towards greater online and open delivery in higher education.
  - *For learners:* the acquisition of 21st century skills necessary for the workplace and to actively participate in the new digital world;
  - *For institutions:* attracting underserved populations of potential students and developing a more diversified and extensive offer of lifelong learning services for a global outreach;
  - *For employers:* high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace; and
  - *For Governments:* support and enhancement of the quality and relevance of existing educational structures and programs, promotion of innovation and opportunities for lifelong and life-wide learning, and a more effective use of public resources.
- Regulatory frameworks may significantly hinder or enhance the development and transformative contribution of open and distance learning.
- The current regulatory framework in higher education is complex and multi-level covering acts of parliament, policy, rules, governance and funding structures and operating at international, regional, national and local government levels and even at institutional levels.
- It is noted that, regardless of whether regulation of open and distance learning is integrated into or differentiated from current education regulation, it is necessary that regulatory frameworks take account of open and distance learning and do not hinder the implementation and expansion of this part of the education sector.
- Although regulatory and policy frameworks can have a major impact on the introduction and expansion of online and distance learning, there are also other factors that can determine how effective any implementation of regulations or policy will be in encouraging and facilitating online and distance learning.
- Public perceptions influence public policy goals and inform development, implementation and enforcement of higher education regulatory frameworks, which are often responses to competing, and sometimes conflicting, public values.

Existing educational practices cannot accommodate open and distance learning without corresponding shifts in the fundamental views of teaching and learning. It remains the case that traditional pedagogical theories and practices can be at odds with what may be required in the open and distance learning setting.



## Summary Recommendations

- All stakeholders need to promote a better and deeper understanding of the role and contribution of open and distance learning for meeting societal challenges, notably for driving productivity and economic growth as a sustainable option for increased participation in higher education.
- There needs to be support by governments and other stakeholders to ensure a sustainable financial and legal framework for open and distance learning research, innovation and creativity.
- Governments, regulatory bodies, institutions, professional bodies and other influential stakeholders need to review current regulatory frameworks and identify and inventory areas of strengths and weaknesses in existing regulations and policies in relation to open and distance learning, consistently across sectors and at many levels, to determine whether reform is necessary and how it should be driven.
- Collaboration across borders should strive for agreement on how quality in open and distance learning is defined, measured, acquitted and attested, as well as how to foster virtual mobility.
- Governmental, cross-border, inter-agency and inter-institutional collaboration will all be necessary to fashion a robust framework and public profile for open and distance learning in order to allow it to realise its full potential and contribute to the solution for the mounting education demand globally.
- Regions should consider inter- and intra-country high capacity ICT infrastructures for education and research, that are crucial for the capacity and services needed for online and distance learning. Open and distance learning provides benefits for many major stakeholders.

## Outline of the problem

Education worldwide is transforming rapidly, with diverse driving factors fuelling increased demand. As Sir John Daniel has often been quoted as saying, the growing need for higher education outstrips the capability of the globe to respond in ways that are efficient and sustainable. He calculated that one new, conventional university would need to open every week to cope with future student demand. Open and distance learning, especially delivered and facilitated by the internet and advances of information communication technologies (ICT), now offers new ways in which to widen access to education. This policy briefing considers how open and distance learning can help meet the increasing demand globally for higher education and whether regulation, (or its absence), advances or hinders this agenda. Some initiatives that need to be put in place for advancing open and distance learning as a solution are outlined.

While this policy briefing is not intended to impose any particular policy or model, it is hoped that it will inform policy-making and assessment of regulatory frameworks by regulatory bodies like regional organisations, national governments, funding agencies and academic and research institutions, as well as being of interest to other stakeholders such as the ICDE Executive, Commonwealth of Learning, EU, UNESCO, OECD and NGOs.



## Background and Context

Education has to be considered in relation to its global economic, social and cultural context. Increasing populations; development of more knowledge-based, service-oriented and increasingly globalised economies; the resultant changes in the organisation of work and the structure of skills/competencies needed; rising mobility of people, programmes and institutions across borders and the requirement in a fast-paced world to retrain regularly and continuously refresh knowledge are some of the factors placing increasing and ever more diversified demands on the education sector in the networked society.

Virtually all countries worldwide are facing the challenge of expanding access in all its forms, improving quality and ensuring equity, especially in higher education. Declining public funding in many national contexts and often inadequate financial and administrative capacity to respond to the growing demand have already sometimes pushed educational development outside the public education sector, for example, to private education and training organisations and employers. Increasingly, online education in many global jurisdictions is not purely the domain of the public education sector. The pressure of these demands has also led to a growth in the number of single mode open universities that have emerged to absorb large numbers of new learners, as well as a general trend of traditional universities to start offering their programmes through distance education.

In an era of decreasing state funding for higher education and increasing demand for enrolments, particularly in developing countries, it is hardly surprising that there is growing interest in the use of online and distance learning, especially at the higher education level, to extend access and increase flexible learning opportunities. The rapid development of ICT has been a driving force behind the major changes in the world economy and the emergence of more open, knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalised societies. Advances in ICT continue to create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of higher education and reinforce the trend towards greater online delivery of education. Most higher education providers now deliver at least part of their courses online to support traditional teaching (referred to as dual mode, hybrid or blended learning amongst others).

## Benefits of open and distance learning

Open and distance learning has been in operation for over one hundred years in more developed regions, but usually only for one or two generations in developing regions. Today, it is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education and training.

Open and distance learning has long been understood to be learning where the learner and teacher are separated by timespace and/or distance. Since its beginnings in the 1800's as print materials distributed via a postal service, open and distance learning has evolved over this time period with the introduction of radio and television broadcasts, then cassette and video tapes and, more recently, CDROMs, podcasts and vodcasts and synchronous technologies have continued to expand the reach and type of materials and learning activities presented to students. Open and distance learning is now mainstreamed in a new learning landscape created by the availability of technologies supporting flexible, accessible and increasingly personalised education. While originally conceptualised for the learner who may be unable to attend a traditional learning setting (for numerous reasons) or for the 'second chance' learner, today open and distance learning is viewed as an option amongst the many now on offer for those who need flexibility in where, when and how they study.

Open and distance learning provides benefits for many major stakeholders:

### For the student/learner

- increased access and flexibility
- ability to combine work and education
- reduced travel time and costs
- more learner-centred approach
- relevance to authentic learning needs
- enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction
- acquisition of 21st century skills necessary for the workplace.

### For institutions

- attracting global underserved populations of potential students
- improved teaching quality
- support for continuing education
- reduced need for bricks and mortar infrastructure.

### For employers

- high quality and usually cost effective professional development in the workplace
- reduced travel time and costs
- easy, regular upgrading of skills
- increased productivity
- development of a new learning culture
- sharing of costs and training time
- increased portability of training.

### For governments potential to

- increase capacity and cost-effectiveness of education and training systems
- reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training
- reduce gender inequality by allowing women to access higher education through distance learning, while staying at home with their families and in their own countries and communities
- ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks and information resources
- support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures and programs
- promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong and life-wide learning.

Open and distance learning has a decisive role to play in meeting the demand for higher education and the creation of a global, knowledge-based, networked society. Crucially, open and distance learning can contribute to the global commitment to provide quality education for everyone worldwide, as expressed in the goals of Education for All (EFA). The possibilities and opportunities presented by the OER movement have clearly captured the imagination of many globally and considerable global commitment to OER from both public and private spheres is evident.

## Is regulatory reform necessary?

Clearly, regulatory frameworks may significantly hinder or enhance the development and transformative contribution of open and distance learning. For example, open universities are undermined if national regulatory agencies prescribe minimum entry academic qualifications. For some open universities, and particularly dual mode universities, institutional policies for staff recruitment, professional development, awards and promotion are often modelled on and similar to those in face-to-face universities. Their emphasis on research, therefore, overlooks effective teaching and learner support as criteria for promotion or professional development opportunities. Even policies about what hardware and software are provided to students/institutions can have a major impact on learning and pedagogical practice.

Perhaps a more worrying example is India's recent announcement <http://chronicle.com/article/Indias-New-Rules-for-Foreign/133782/> that it would more closely regulate the many joint-and dual-degree programs its universities have developed with foreign partners, imposing new restrictions, which include allowing only institutions ranked in the top 500 worldwide to collaborate with Indian universities. Such stringent requirements and rules dictating academic partnerships and twinning programs will preclude access to the very expertise that India will need in the years ahead—that of institutions with experience and a track record in open and distance learning, which are unlikely to be ranked in the top 500 globally. Rankings are a dubious mechanism for evaluating the quality of academic programs and ensuring partnerships of high quality, so this is the sort of regulation that is likely to be a hindrance to expansion of quality open and distance learning.

The rapid uptake of open and distance learning and the forecast of continued growth as a key form of higher education delivery highlights different aspects of the open and distance learning experience that will require attention. These include for example mobility and portability of qualifications; access; connectivity to technology; funding models; resources; support and advisory services; capacity and capability to suggest but a few. This raises questions about

- whether existing regulatory structures and legal frameworks are robust enough to deal with accelerating change in the higher education market, especially the diversification of education providers, the development of new innovative ways of delivering education, the globalisation of education and the maintenance of standards, and
- whether current accreditation, quality assurance processes and other regulatory requirements are appropriate and likely to support good practice in open and distance learning provision, decision-making and accountability.

### EXAMPLE

Policy to promote mobility needs to consider:

- recognition of academic credit transfer and foreign credentials
- cross-border academic travel
- visa and language requirements
- fit with national quality standards
- ensuring linguistic plurality and multi-cultural resources
- compressed degrees
- lack of funding
- harmonisation of academic calendars
- provision of student support services

## Integration or Differentiation of Regulatory Mechanisms for Higher Education

Calls for regulatory reform are often prompted by the apparent lack of legislation, regulation or policy specific to open and distance learning. Indeed, research in the Southeast Asia/Southwest Pacific region [http://www.icde.org/filestore/Regulatory\\_Framework/RegulatoryFrameworksforDEfinalreport2.pdf](http://www.icde.org/filestore/Regulatory_Framework/RegulatoryFrameworksforDEfinalreport2.pdf), which informs this policy brief, found international and national legislation and policy regulating education generally in all of the included countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Pacific Islands Forum countries of Australia, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and French Polynesia) and relevant regional agreements in most countries, with a few countries even having State/district level regulation; yet legislation specific to open and distance learning was only reported in Malaysia, Vietnam and Vanuatu.

There are two opposing views on the regulation of open and distance learning, particularly in relation to quality assurance, accreditation and student support. One viewpoint claims that open and distance learning is significantly different to traditional education and should have distinct quality assurance and accreditation frameworks, tools, procedures and even separate regulatory bodies from that of traditional universities. National regulatory frameworks cannot respond quickly enough and are considered inadequate to address the unique characteristics of open and distance learning. This does not take account of the overlap in many aspects in different education modes and perhaps tends towards unnecessary complexity and regulatory and bureaucratic proliferation that can obscure transparency.

At the other end of the scale, the argument usually put by regulatory agencies that open and distance learning should be subject to the same regulatory frameworks as that of conventional universities, seemingly ignores the differing requirements of different modes of learning and different learners.

A student-centred approach argues students should be defined by their enrolment in a course or program, not by whether they are distant, online or on-campus learners. Hence, policies or regulations that provide management, guidance and direction to educational systems should seamlessly include and incorporate the concepts of distant, online and un-moderated delivery of instruction. An *integrated approach* advocates modifying existing structures, regulations, rules and policies to integrate an open and distance learning, instead of developing new structures and policies specifically for open and distance learning. Policy or regulation changes necessitated by the development of open and distance learning merely demonstrate a natural progressive development of regulatory frameworks to accommodate new innovative modes of education delivery and changing educational institutional cultures. Integration indicates that open and distance learning is of equal standing to traditional education and a routine, regularly occurring and important component of the overall educational enterprise.

Ultimately, what is more important than whether integrated or differentiated regulation is adopted, is that regulatory frameworks take account of open and distance learning and do not hinder the implementation and expansion of this part of the sector.



## Challenges

Lack of infrastructure, equity of access to ICT and professional competence in open and distance learning remain important barriers.

### The complexity of regulatory frameworks

The regulatory framework itself is complex and multi-level covering acts of parliament, policy, rules, governance and funding structures and operating at international, regional, national and local government levels and even at institutional levels. The open and distance education sector is subject to varying laws, policies, rules, regulations and practices imposed by government legislators, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, professional associations, academic associations, student bodies, credential evaluation and recognition bodies, regional and international organisations, and educational institutions themselves via their internal strategic and operational planning. Regulatory control in non-academic areas, such as pastoral care and fee protection or regimes in the area of tax and exchange regulations, can also affect the development of open and distance education systems. Any assessment of the impact of regulatory frameworks needs to consider all these different aspects.

Although regulatory and policy frameworks can have a major impact on the introduction and expansion of open and distance learning, there are also other factors that can determine how effective any implementation of regulations or policy will be in encouraging and facilitating open and distance learning. Although local institutions and governments appear to have autonomy in educational policy formulation and practice, international trends have a wide ranging impact on peripheral systems of education. The demand for transnational and cross-border higher education has made education one of the top globally traded services. Some of the recent regional and international agreements, such as the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) potentially have strong implications for development of open and distance learning. Similarly, ICT is not only vitally important to economic development and participation in the global networked society, but also plays a crucial role in the ability of ICT facilitated open and distance learning to broaden access to education for all. Therefore, policy focused on the telecommunications infrastructure as well as the policies and laws directly regulating the internet also have an impact on the potential of open and distance learning in higher education. Furthermore, philanthropic associations, professional and industry bodies and, in some countries, teacher unions can also play an important role in shaping these policies. Co-operation needs to be garnered from all of these influential stakeholders to ensure an integrated, systemic approach for success.

### EXAMPLE

Infrastructure that can deliver the capacity and services required for online education is necessary. Models for achieving that can be found globally. In Europe the European Union has established the GÉANT [www.geant.net/](http://www.geant.net/)

What is géant?

GÉANT is the third generation of the GÉANT network, and successor to GÉANT2. Designed and built on behalf of a consortium of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs), with funding support from the European Commission as part of its 7th Framework Programme, the GÉANT network provides a vital research infrastructure as well as the necessary resources for information technology and telecommunications development.

Nordic countries also established in 1986 a collaboration that led to Nordunet.

[www.nordu.net/ndnweb/home](http://www.nordu.net/ndnweb/home)

Australia has AARNet [www.arnet.edu.au/](http://www.arnet.edu.au/)



## Public opinion

Regulatory legitimisation of open and distance learning is necessary but alone will not be sufficient to attain its social legitimisation. Core to open and distance learning is improving flexibility, access and pedagogy; but despite the positive evidence, convergence in public opinion about its efficacy remains elusive in some jurisdictions. Some believe open and distance learning is central in higher education systems designed to be fit-for-purpose in the modern world, because it offers the potential for more accessible, flexible, economical sustainable and pedagogically superior education. Others, however, perceive open and distance learning in higher education as a threat—pedagogically unproven, “second class”, disruptive to legitimate public (and teacher) control of higher education by undermining quality assurance processes (especially with respect to cross-border education), incapable of matching the disciplinary breadth and socialisation capability of face-to-face education.

Public perceptions influence public policy goals and inform development, implementation and enforcement of higher education regulatory frameworks, which are often responses to competing, and sometimes conflicting, public values.

## Pedagogical changes

Existing educational practices cannot accommodate open and distance learning without corresponding shifts in the fundamental views of teaching and learning. It remains that traditional pedagogical theories and practices can be at odds with what may be required in the open and distance learning setting. Very few institutions have introduced more inclusive and responsive policies or strategies especially in relation to retention and progression of learners or professional development and promotional linkages for academics. Wider Institutional leadership in appropriate policies and support provision could greatly assist in an attitudinal change to participation in open and distance learning.

# Recommendations

## All stakeholders

1. Key stakeholders need to more deeply understand the role and contribution of open and distance learning for meeting societal challenges, notably for driving productivity and economic growth as a sustainable option for increased participation in tertiary education. There is also a need to analyse the economic, social and cultural impacts of increased participation in higher education on communities of both young and mature-age learners and their new capacity to contribute to society at large.
2. The right regulation should protect students and taxpayers and not create a bureaucratic burden that stifles innovation and obscures transparency. Key policy areas (i.e. governance, quality, capacity and capability, infrastructure, culture, cross-border) are fundamental to developing and managing distance education efforts and, combined in an analysis framework, might be used to identify and inventory areas of strengths and weaknesses in existing regulations and policies in relation to open and distance learning consistently across sectors and at many levels.
3. A campaign of broader promotion of the benefits of open and distance learning and Open Educational Practices in meeting the education needs of potential learners could heighten the profile of open and distance education. E-learning could be further encouraged to build on the possibilities presented by Open Educational Resources (OERs) by supporting and rewarding their production, use and re-use.

## Governments

1. It is likely that open and distance learning is the only viable solution to future increasingly complex and diversified education demands, particularly in the tertiary, higher and continuing education sectors. The continuing growth of the open education movement and the recent hype around MOOCs (see [www.obhe.ac.uk/](http://www.obhe.ac.uk/)) or emerging consortia such as Coursera, edX, Udacity, FutureLearn and OERu, for example, only serve to emphasize that open and distance learning has developed into a mainstream form of education. The critical challenge is to put in place regulatory mechanisms relevant to this emerging learning environment that will not only assure quality and address considerations of local applicability and equity, but will also change public perception on the quality of open and distance learning education programs and products.
2. Any action must be designed to take into account the broad range of issues that might impinge upon the promotion of online and distance learning. It is essential that the opportunities offered by open and distance learning education be realistically evaluated within the framework of international agreements, national development plans, in general, and educational regulation and policies, in particular.
3. Apart from infrastructure issues, a national policy needs to cover tariffs, market structure of operators, plans for networks in rural areas, and new services and human resources development. Because infrastructure, applications, services, economy, demographics, user knowledge and skills, costs, the regulatory environment and potentials are different in the different countries, each country needs to craft national policies in a number of areas that are integrated with other national plans and programmes.
4. Every country will also have to deal with the impact of convergence of media, telecommunications and data. This potentially could be both inter- and intra-country.
5. It will be important to establish infrastructures that can deliver the capacity and services needed for online and distance learning. Many examples exist globally which can be drawn upon as examples.

## Regulatory bodies, institutions, professional bodies and other influential stakeholders

1. Being on the cusp of significant global shifts presents the perfect opportunity for inter-agency collaboration in the review, assessment and benchmarking of existing regulatory frameworks and policies in order to determine whether reform is necessary to ensure their adequacy for accommodating and supporting open and distance learning in addressing the escalating demand for knowledge acquisition.
2. A systemic approach to quality assurance and accreditation and formalised processes and delegated responsibilities can be identified in most countries; but collaboration across borders might accommodate congruence on how quality is defined, measured, acquitted and attested.
3. Candid, empirical data derived from research might resolve many of the issues and uncertainties raised and clarify the contextual complexity. There is an urgent requirement to develop, support and ensure a sustainable financial and legal framework for open and distance learning research, innovation and creativity at international, national and institutional levels, in order to inform policy, influence and shape practice (teaching and learning) and address issues of access, quality, equity and success. Sharing of knowledge about the impact of changing technologies, markets and learner experiences through large cross-border studies of open and distance learning will provide evidence of practice essential to understanding impact for strategic benefit.



4. Institutional members of ICDE across the globe include significantly sized open and distance learning institutions that can contribute profiles, case studies and provide benchmarking groups for developing contextually aware approaches to regulation, policy and quality in open and distance learning. Recognised leading providers can provide strategies and leadership to a broader community of possible open and distance education development. This community approach could reduce costs considerably through co-operation across borders and strengthening open and distance learning as a sustainable and marketable option.
5. Many regions have localised organisations which focus on open and distance learning. ICDE has a comprehensive list of International, regional and national organisations [www.icde.org/en/context/](http://www.icde.org/en/context/) that could be drawn upon for advice and input to reduce the need to 'reinvent the wheel'.

## Conclusion

Globalisation and the imperatives of the networked society are affecting higher education almost everywhere in the world. Open and distance learning may be the only way of meeting future evermore complex and diversified student demands. In any case, open and distance learning are continuing to grow at a very fast pace. Development of workable and relevant regulatory frameworks that are transparent and not overly bureaucratic are imperative to the success of open and distance learning and realisation of its benefit for students and its contribution to the solution for mounting education pressures. Governmental, cross-border, inter-agency and inter-institutional collaboration will all be necessary to fashion a robust framework and public profile for open and distance learning.

## Appendix: Case Study of Regulatory Frameworks Asia/Pacific

In 2012 ICDE reported the pilot study of Asia/Pacific regulatory frameworks. This Policy Briefing and the included Case Study draws heavily on the original report *Regulatory Frameworks for Distance Education: A Pilot Study in the Southwest Pacific/South East Asia Region* authored by Rosalind James, Belinda Tynan, Stephen Marshall, Len Webster, Gordon Suddaby & Richard Lewis, 2012. Support for the original work was provided by ICDE. The report can be located at [http://www.icde.org/en/resources/regulatory\\_frameworks/](http://www.icde.org/en/resources/regulatory_frameworks/)

The methodological approach included identifying, accessing, collating, analysing and presenting regulatory information.

Cultural sensitivity was a key consideration as it is recognised that different cultures will have different understandings of quality and management of ODL.

The project explored the regulatory frameworks for distance higher education within the Asia/Pacific region limiting this to some key members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Island Forum nations. This involved a survey of existing literature and regulatory agency material for the following countries: ASEAN: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Pacific Islands Forum countries of Australia, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji (suspended from ASEAN on 2 May 2009), Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

That study of 24 Asia/Pacific countries found a range of regulatory frameworks existing at three levels. These were at the International, national and local institutional level. All countries in the study had some form of regulation at all levels.

### International regulatory or policy influences

Policy at this level that generally guides the region include:

Education for All (EFA) program  
[www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed\\_for\\_all/](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/)

Millennium Development Goals  
[www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)

United Nations Literacy Decade <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001840/184023e.pdf>

UNESCO's Four Pillars of Education  
[www.unesco.org/delors/fourpil.htm](http://www.unesco.org/delors/fourpil.htm)

United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) [www.desd.org/](http://www.desd.org/)

### Regional regulatory or policy influences

The South Pacific Board of Education Assessment (SPBEA) [www.spbea.org.fj/](http://www.spbea.org.fj/)

The University of the South Pacific strategic plan 2010-2102 which serves twelve member countries  
[www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/academic/pdo/Planning/USP\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_2010\\_2012.pdf](http://www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/academic/pdo/Planning/USP_Strategic_Plan_2010_2012.pdf)

Pacific Islands Forum (PAF) [www.forumsec.org/](http://www.forumsec.org/)

The Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) [www.dfat.gov.au/fta/pacer/index.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/fta/pacer/index.html)

2001 Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) [www.forumsec.org.fj/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/PICTA.pdf](http://www.forumsec.org.fj/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/PICTA.pdf)

ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area Agreement (AANZFTA) [www.asean.fta.govt.nz/](http://www.asean.fta.govt.nz/)

The following bilateral agreements: AusAID, the New Zealand Aid Programme, UNICEF and a number of European Union agencies

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) initiative the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) [www.vussc.info/home](http://www.vussc.info/home)

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community [www.spc.int/](http://www.spc.int/)

### National regulatory or policy influences

Without exception, every country in this project has National Acts, Ordinances or Legislation relating to the governance of education. Distance education was found to be operating at all levels of education in the region: 50% of countries offer schooling by distance, 66% offer VET courses by distance, and only one country (Brunei) does not have distance education at a higher education level. In general, the project identified that all countries had legislation and policy at the national level that impacted directly on a country's capability and capacity for distance education. State/district level regulation could only be identified in the case of Micronesia, Vanuatu and Australia. Although most countries offer distance education in some form, especially at higher levels of education, and distance education has a long history in this region of the world, having operated in many countries since the 1970s, legislation specific to distance education was uncovered in only two countries, Vietnam and Vanuatu.

### Quality regulations

Establishing quality processes and standards for learning and teaching in online and distance education is a concern of many stakeholders. In some countries, it drives government policy and educational research and development in this area.

Of the twenty-four countries surveyed, twenty have processes for quality assurance and accreditation for distance education; although it is unclear whether the use of new

technologies has been addressed. For example, the Quality Assurance, Quality Enhancement special interest group (QAQE, 2010) observes that while technology-enhanced learning is increasingly embedded within standard practice in higher education, current approaches to quality assurance contribute to the neglect of the ways in which technology can enhance rather than simply augment teaching and learning and that these issues can be exacerbated in transnational and distance learning programmes.

A systemic approach to quality assurance and accreditation and formalised processes and delegated responsibilities could be identified in all countries except Kiribati, Nauru, Solomon Islands and Palau.

### **Quality frameworks in use**

Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN)

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

Global Initiative on Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC)

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

United States of America (USA) and the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities [www.paascu.org.ph/home2010/](http://www.paascu.org.ph/home2010/)

### **Conclusions**

The most surprising realisation to emerge during the project was that there is very little scholarly literature against which to benchmark distance education regulatory frameworks. Lengthy and detailed searches of academic and corporate literature revealed little other than agency reporting. This points to a gap which key stakeholders may wish to pursue, given that there is no agreement on standards and accountability measures.

### **A matrix for regulatory and policy frameworks**

What would a 'benchmarking' matrix of good practice for regulatory frameworks look like? This pilot project identified numerous regulatory layers that could contribute to such a matrix. Amongst these the APQN is no doubt highly suitable to draw upon or more recently the AAOU Quality Assurance Statements, which contain 107 statements of best practice including policy and planning that has been drawn upon heavily by Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia (one of this project's case study universities and also awarded ICDE Certificate of Quality in recognition of their decade worth of work). But these are probably more relevant to this region and perhaps not all nations.

The project cautions that without comprehensive culturally sensitive benchmarking exercises the reduction of the assessment of the regulatory frameworks to a theoretical exercise may well result in paternalistic or culturally imperialistic assumptions and or the mythicising of anecdotal rumour about barriers, or otherwise, to regulation of distance education.

### **Institution Practice**

From our own investigation through the country and institutional case studies, a second significant realisation emerged. The data revealed that most institutions have limited public strategies or specific policy frameworks underpinning their distance education programs. Nevertheless, the case studies documented within the study reveal some well-executed implementations within organisations.

### **Other issues**

Caution is necessary when drawing assumptions about barriers, and no assumption should be made that inclusion of regulatory frameworks are indeed required. For example, this study found that ICT and capacity development were major factors to be considered. It is important that cultural and political sensitivities are observed and that a broad range of opinions across the region are sought.

### **Specific recommendation for this group of countries**

- Seek agreement on standards and accountability measures for open and distance learning inter- and intra-country to support mobility and portability of qualifications.
- Develop a matrix for regulatory and policy frameworks across the region, bringing together the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) ([www.aaou.net](http://www.aaou.net)) and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) as the enablers and facilitators.
- Encourage organisations to draw upon quality frameworks, benchmark across the region and draw upon existing frameworks such as the eMaturity model to develop robust and quality ODL.
- The region should consider inter- and intra-country ICT infrastructures that can deliver the capacity and services needed for online and distance learning.
- Cultural integrity is essential to ensure that differences across nations can be accommodated.

Support for this policy briefing has been provided by the International Council of Open and Distance Educators (ICDE). The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the recommendations of the ICDE or its members.

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**ISBN** Print: 978-82-93172-18-5  
PDF: 978-82-93172-19-2

## Acknowledgements

This Policy Briefing was developed through the contributions of:

**Dr Rosalind James** (University of New England)

**Professor Belinda Tynan** (University of Southern Queensland)

**Professor Narend Baijnath** (University of South Africa)

**Professor António Moreira Teixeira** (Universidade Aberta)

We acknowledge with gratitude the support for this Policy Briefing from the International Council of Open and Distance Educators (ICDE).