

# Editorial: The human dimension: reframing access, equity, and pedagogy in distance education

Welcome to the third issue of our 2025 volume. The landscape of education is in a state of perpetual transformation, a process significantly accelerated by the global proliferation of digital technologies. Study modalities, including open and distance learning (ODL) as well as blended learning, are no longer peripheral alternatives but have become central to discussions on educational access, equity and innovation. This issue delves into the intricate and evolving world of ODL, presenting a collection of six compelling articles that collectively push the boundaries of our current understanding. The contributions herein move beyond generalized frameworks to explore the nuanced realities of ODL across diverse learner populations, pedagogical strategies and geographical contexts, with a significant focus on perspectives from Asia and the Global South. A unifying thread throughout this issue is a profound call to recenter the human element, the learner's unique context, values and experiences, within our increasingly technology-mediated educational ecosystems.

The issue opens by examining innovative pedagogical models tailored for specific learner groups. In their systematic review, [Tang et al. \(2025\)](#) introduce the concept of “agile-blended learning” (AB learning) for metropolitan learners. Their analysis of recent literature highlights flexibility, learner autonomy and technology-mediated collaboration as defining characteristics of this emerging approach, offering a valuable framework for institutions serving urban populations. Shifting to a highly specialized and often overlooked demographic, [Husain \(2025\)](#) provides a powerful case study on the Bangladesh Open University's program for armed forces personnel. Using a mixed-methods design, Husain's research illuminates the profound professional, socioeconomic and academic impact of ODL on soldiers, demonstrating how flexible learning can bridge the gap between service commitments and personal development, even within highly restrictive environments. Complementing this, [Anandan et al. \(2025\)](#) offer a crucial comparative analysis of prospective and current ODL students in Malaysia. Their findings reveal that while time constraints and access to human support are key enrolment drivers, both groups share a preference for collaborative, flexible and deep learning experiences. This study provides ODL institutions with actionable strategies to enhance student recruitment and, more importantly, retention by better aligning services with learner needs.

The next set of articles advances the discourse by exploring the integration of values, ethics and critical literacies into digital learning environments – a vital consideration in an era of rapid technological advancement. [Nurhayati et al. \(2025\)](#) present a pioneering study from Indonesia on integrating digital citizenship with religious moderation in an open and distance education setting. Through qualitative inquiry, they demonstrate how this holistic approach to character development can mitigate the risks of digital radicalization, enhance intercultural understanding and strengthen students' moral resilience. Their work provides a practical blueprint, involving flipped classrooms and project-based learning on social media, for fostering tolerant and responsible digital citizens. Echoing this human-centric focus, [Lim et al.](#)



© Kam Cheong Li, Tian Belawati and Haibing Hou. Published in the *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this license may be seen at [Link to the terms of the CC BY 4.0 licence](#).

(2025) challenge the technology-centric discourse surrounding artificial intelligence in education (AIED). In their study of postgraduate students in developing Asia, they employ the novel “method of empathy-based stories” to advocate for critical AI literacy. Their findings underscore students’ concerns about preserving essential human qualities and position the student voice not merely as feedback but as a fundamental epistemic contribution to shaping more humanistic and ethical AIED frameworks.

Rounding out the pedagogical and learner-focused investigations, an article scrutinizes the effectiveness of ODL. [Chuanyuan and Herath \(2025\)](#) offer a much-needed Global South perspective on the quality of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Their mixed-methods research reveals a critical discrepancy between the design intentions of instructors and the actual achievement of deep learning outcomes by students. They identify a lack of professional scaffolding and institutional challenges as key impediments, proposing context-sensitive strategies to better align course design with the development of 21st-century competencies.

Collectively, the articles in this issue paint a rich and complex picture of the state of open and distance learning today. They champion a move away from one-size-fits-all solutions towards context-aware, culturally sensitive and human-centered approaches. From the urban centers of Asia to the cantonments of Bangladesh and from the ethical frontiers of AI to the intricacies of copyright law, these studies provide invaluable insights for researchers, practitioners and policymakers. We are confident that this collection will not only inform but also inspire further dialogs and innovations aimed at creating more effective, equitable and meaningful learning experiences for all.

We extend our sincere gratitude to the authors for their insightful contributions and to our dedicated reviewers for their scholarly diligence.

**Kam Cheong Li, Tian Belawati and Haibing Hou**

## References

- Anandan, A., Ong, C.S.B. and Funk, A.Y.L. (2025), “Comparing factors influencing enrollment and learning preferences among prospective and current open and distance learners (ODL)”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 245-260, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-10-2024-0134](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-10-2024-0134).
- Chuanyuan, S. and Herath, H.J. (2025), “Perceptions of the quality of open online courses in OUSL from the perspective of deep learning”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 291-309, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0027](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0027).
- Husain, I. (2025), “Bridging education and service through open and distance learning model: a study of armed forces learners”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 228-244, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0040](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0040).
- Lim, D.C., Mat, H. and Yusoooff, F. (2025), “Centring the human: critical AI literacy, student engagement, and institutional implications for open universities in developing Asia”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 277-290, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-04-2025-0041](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-04-2025-0041).
- Nurhayati, L., Supriadi, U., Jenuri, J. and Karim, A. (2025), “Integrating digital citizenship and religious moderation in open and distance education: a holistic approach to character development in Indonesia”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 261-276, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-02-2025-0025](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-02-2025-0025).
- Tang, W.K., Chan, V. and Zhang, X. (2025), “Agile-blended learning for metropolitan learners: insights and trends”, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 215-227, doi: [10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0035](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAOUJ-03-2025-0035).