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## Public misconception mars distance learning

THE history of distance education has been marred by the public misconception that it is a second-class education compared to the full-time on-campus education.

"This misconception arises from many factors, one of which is that the public do not know what exactly is distance education," said Professor Dr Szarina Abdullah, associate rector of distance education at Institut Teknologi Mara.

She said this is one of the many reasons that prompted ITM to host the 11th Annual Conference and Exhibition of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) from Nov 11 to 14 at the Putra World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur. This is the first time the conference and exhibition are being held in Malaysia.

"Malaysian academics, administrators and the public can learn from experts who have been managing distance education from around the world," said Szarina, who is chairwoman of the conference organising committee.

The theme of the conference is "Quality Assurance in Distance and Open Learning" and the issue of "quality" will be discussed in detail at the conference by Sir John Daniel, vice-chancellor of the Open University in Britain, in his keynote address.

When the Open University opened its doors in 1971, it faced the uphill task of convincing the public, professional bodies and conventional universities that the distance mode of learning is by no means inferior to the conventional teaching mode.

Now, the Open University has become a model for "mega-universities" in other parts of the world and conventional British universities use Open University materials for their full-time students.

Daniel will discuss the quality assurance processes that led to the recognition and accreditation of the Open University programmes.

"When one looks at the design, development and production of learning materials for distance learners, one will see a picture of well-planned quality control processes that exist in any reputable organisation before it delivers its products and services to its customers," said Szarina.

"The issue of accrediting distance learning programmes has become critical in Malaysia as we collaborate with many overseas universities through both the full-time and distance learning mode.

"Now is the chance for us to learn about 'quality' distance learning and to realise its potential in helping Malaysia achieve the target of 40 per cent of the population in possession of tertiary qualifications," she added.

Professor Datuk Dr G. Dhanarajan, president of the Commonwealth of Learning, Canada, will present a keynote address on "Quality assurance in relation to global competitiveness and distance learning".

During the past 15 years, he has participated in establishing a number of distance education systems in South and Southeast Asia. He was a director of the centre for external studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia and served as director of the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong from 1991-95.

At one of the plenary sessions, Professor James Taylor, director of distance education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, will talk on "Opportunities and strategies for staff development in industry using the flexible learning system".

Taylor's paper should interest human resource and personnel managers. He will highlight how staff training can be carried out with flexibility, efficacy and cost-effectiveness using distance education methodology and technology.

Taylor will draw on success stories in organisations such as the Queensland Fire Service, Woodside Offshore Petroleum Pte Ltd, and John Deere and Co, Mexico.

Discussions of distance learning will not be complete without touching on the technology that plays a critical role in the production and delivery of distance and open learning programmes.

Two education specialists from the United States will look at the evaluation and application of appropriate technology to improve learning.

Professor Martin Siegel, of Indiana University, will talk on "Creating the digital learning environment: Wisdom tools for quality distance education", while Russel Colbert Jr will present a paper on "Optimising technology for quality learning".

These two papers should interest teachers, course designers and education technologists who are working on smart school projects, virtual classrooms and virtual campus.

Other papers at the conference will touch on teacher training, nursing education, English language teaching, business administration, science and mathematics.

There will also be presentations on materials development, student support, technology applications and delivery systems.

You can also find out how China and Japan run their University of the Air in order to upgrade the knowledge and skills of working adults who cannot afford to leave their jobs to attend full-time on-campus classes.

Newcomers to distance and open education, and old-timers who want to learn new things, can join the pre-conference workshops scheduled from Nov 11 to 12. There are four workshops to choose from.

The workshop on "Quality assurance in distance education" will be facilitated by Dr Ian Mugridge of the Commonwealth of Learning and will deal with the overall planning and implementation of quality processes in distance education.

Those who are more interested in materials development should sign up for the "Instructional Materials Development" workshop to be led by Vasu Subrahmanyam of ITM.

Technology-oriented educators could benefit from either the workshop to be conducted by Dr Marcie Williams on "Developing quality distance and open learning using Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor", or the workshop on "Using electronic communication networks to support students and tutors" to be facilitated by Dr Nick Heap of the Open University, who pioneered the use of computer conferencing as an integrated component of distance education.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to open the conference on Nov 12. He will also present the first AAOU Meritorious Award to the individual who contributed in the advancement of distance education in Asia.

"Join us in this conference to prepare ourselves for the new era of quality life-long learning for the 21st century," said Szarina.

\* For further information on the conference and exhibition and the pre-conference workshops, call the secretariat at 03-5564014, 03-5563827 (Norimah Abu Bakar), or 03-5595341 (Fauzieah Hanim); fax 03-5591057; e-mail: [aaou@psmb.itm.edu.my](mailto:aaou@psmb.itm.edu.my); homepage: <http://www.ksmk.itm.edu.my>

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