ESTABLISHED in 2007, Asia e University (AeU) has grown to become one of the leading providers of open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia.

The students are drawn from more than 100 countries spread across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

As an ODL institution, AeU's focus is to harness the boundless potential of technology to increase higher education accessibility for all.

This new approach to higher education gives rise to greater flexibility in learning to meet the needs of the 21st century society.

Prof Datuk Dr Ansary Ahmed is an educational entrepreneur, founder and president of AeU with about 40 years of experience in education.

In 2010, Asia Pacific Entrepreneurship Awards named him the Most Promising Entrepreneur. Before founding AeU, Prof Ansary helped establish Open University Malaysia (OUM).

Here is an interview with Prof Ansary about AeU, ODL and the disruptive innovation in higher education.

Expanding learning accessibility

Q How did the idea for AeU come about?

As an educationist from a traditional university who was later involved in establishing an open university, I saw the difference that access to education can make in a person's life.

Travelling within Malaysia and in the Asian region and meeting potential students especially in smaller towns, rural areas and remote areas made me realise that the traditional approach to higher education – that is, through a brick-and-mortar campus – is only good for a small segment of society.

With more access to technologies, we have seen an increasing trend towards online learning, especially in developed countries.

We knew the time had come to shift higher education towards an infrastructure for mature students, be they 30 or 70 years old.

We knew our target clients were busy individuals who yearned to improve their qualifications but needed the learning to be wrapped around their hectic lives, where they should be able to pursue their studies at a pace that suits them.

We needed to reach out to them wherever they may be and empower them to manage their own learning, which was only possible by embracing the philosophy of learning anytime and anywhere.

By putting together appropriate technologies and new pedagogies, I started on a journey of creating a new business model for providing access to higher education at an affordable price to people in Asia without compromising quality.

We deliberately did some unbundling that was never done by traditional providers, including the unbundling of content, academic facilitators and assessments.

We were the first movers and shakers that use open source and technologies across borders.

Asia e University's president and chief executive officer Prof Datuk Dr Ansary Ahmed.

Embracing innovation and change in higher education

Innovation through technology

Q How was AeU's education model formed?

In making education accessible to all, I looked at the barriers that surrounded the higher education landscape and researched the best practices of ODL institutions worldwide.

We knew that the online-learning and blended-learning model would become the new norm.

Within the first five years of operating AeU, I realised that the necessary components that made higher education expensive were now readily available and for free: open source technology, open educational resources (OERs) and, most importantly, the predominance and use of social networks.

We opted to adopt open source more aggressively as this allowed our education partners to easily incorporate and use the AeU online learning platform.

Next, we incorporated OERs in developing our content, thus reducing time and cost for content development.

Unesco acknowledged us as one of the early adopters of OERs at its World Education Meeting.

Q What makes AeU different from other academic institutions?

AeU is unique in many ways. At the international level, AeU is instituted under the auspices of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and supported by 34 ACD member countries in Asia.

This university was conceptualised based on inputs gathered from the ACD member countries to complement their respective higher education landscapes.

At the national level, AeU is

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>
> Prof Datuk Dr Ansary Ahmed

under the purview of the Higher Education Ministry, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance.

AeU was established to create and widen access to opportunities for learning by promoting cooperation between educational institutions throughout the ACD.

As an institution that propagates lifelong learning, AeU strives to harness appropriate technologies and improve the quality of our teaching and learning to ensure that learners have the skills needed to succeed in the 21st century.

Q Describe the technologies used in AeU's model.

The use of technology is at the heart of AeU. It is only through the appropriate use of technology that AeU is able to provide flexibility for learners.

For example, with an invisible group of dispersed learners, it is easy to lose touch and sight of each of them.

A key contributor to learning success in the ODL mode is

connectedness, which we have worked hard to create with all our learners.

With learners from more than 100 countries worldwide, AeU has established virtual learning spaces to ensure learners are connected not only to their academic facilitators but also the university administrators, knowledge centre and their peers.

The lowest complexity of technology and open source is applied to ensure the greatest level of connectivity and easy access across the borders.

Most importantly, we always strive to inject a human touch to this virtual classroom.

The goal is to develop a transformational model of education that is learner-centred and personalised.

To enhance our ability to virtually connect with our learners, AeU has a learning management system platform called myPLS to place all learners, professors, lecturers, academic facilitators and administrators in one shared space. We built a platform whereby all the data is associated and wrapped around the learner.

AeU uses myPLS to plan, implement, facilitate, assess and monitor student learning.

The platform centralises course preparation, educational content and resources; the delivery and tracking of student activities such as discussions and forums; the administration of assessment activities; and the accumulation and presentation of marks and grades.

It has the ability to create a persistent, progressive profile that accurately captures the learner's journey from enrolment to the day they become alumni.

AeU has also established AeU

Knowledge Centre – one of the most comprehensive online libraries in the country.

There are thousands of online resources available, including academic books, journals, theses, magazine articles, newspapers, encyclopaedias and dictionaries.

Learners can tap into these quality-assured and trusted resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week, wherever they are.

The AeU administration maintains a virtual help desk through our customer relationship management system to respond to our learners' questions.

It directs queries to the right parties, connects people and seeks networked help whenever such a need is requested.

The well-rounded support ensures every learner has a strong encouraging team behind him or her throughout the learning journey.

Q What are your greatest challenges?

One of the major problems in online studies in general is how to keep busy learners motivated to complete their studies.

As regulatory requirements for online learning differ between countries, we have to patiently educate the regulators and demolish the notion that the best higher education can only be obtained through the traditional mode of campus-based learning.

Language barriers are another challenge. Obviously, it is better to provide education in native languages if one wants to reach out to the majority, but then again, operating in a regulated framework is difficult for a borderless university such as AeU.

As the technology and what we can do with edutech have far outstripped prevailing pedagogic paradigm, we have to develop new pedagogies for the new breed of learners.

This is a major challenge as technology is proving to be a major disruptor. In this context, we should also be mindful of keeping technology as simple as possible if we want to attain education for all.

AeU has consciously taken steps to overcome these challenges.

Q *How has online learning opened, widened and formalised access to quality higher education?*

Online distance learning is going through the next stage of evolution. We have seen in the past what began as a paper-based-correspondence mode of education evolve into ICT-enabled learning.

Technology is reshaping the structure and form of higher education institutions. We are increasingly seeing traditional brick-and-mortar universities also embracing online education.

Courses and subsequent lecturer-student interactions are increasingly taking place online.

I strongly believe ODL providers such as ourselves have helped change the mindsets and higher education landscape in Malaysia, making ODL mainstream.

Developments such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), OERs and increased mobility provide greater opportunities and channels to meet the educational needs of citizens in every nation.

These developments, which leverage heavily on technology, provide high-quality learning opportunities that are either free or at reduced costs. The outcome is a greater global equity and access to learning.

Universities have a unique opportunity to reengineer higher education to make it ubiquitous. Technology offers many ways to improve teaching, increase independent learning by students and enrich the learning experience.

Perhaps, most important of all, it offers a means for real-world problems to be worked on by creative young minds with guidance coming from a borderless academic fraternity.

Partnerships with the industry, governments, non-governmental organisations and other bodies to better understand the needs of society and industry will lead to better designed curricula and learning.

I believe that AeU is well placed to seize these opportunities and be a leader in reengineering higher education.

Staying ahead

Q *There are potential disrupters in the higher education space. How does AeU stay at the forefront of this technological change?*

I think we are at an important juxtaposition. I have been in the higher education industry for around 40 years, during which time we have seen great changes locally and globally. Right now, technology is and will become more destructive.

Universities will have to transform to meet the challenges of not only new learning demands but also the spaces that new edutech startups are creating and occupying.

New disruptors such as Cousera, Udacity and edX are the well-known leaders in MOOCs.

They are edutech startups that are impacting the higher education landscape.

As in the case of Fintech, which is impacting the financial sector, these new edutech companies pose challenges to higher education.

Technology disruption is inevitable. Therefore, it is important to understand how to turn this edutech challenges into educational opportunities.

To remain at the forefront of technological innovation, we must learn from the MOOCs effect and constantly analyse learners' responses to better understand what works and what does not.

We must also be able to provide a combination of high-touch service with personalised self-service.

Q *What are your immediate goals for expanding and improving AeU?*

The new paradigm that is emerging would require AeU to do four things.

Firstly, programmes need to be based on quality OERs that can be adopted and adapted to suit our specific contexts.

Next, the regional and learning centres will have to be redesigned to support learners in smaller numbers in their neighbourhoods or workplaces.

These spaces must promote peer-to-peer interactions and provide both face-to-face and online social learning opportunities.

Thirdly, we have to harness technologies such as mobile devices and learning analytics to personalise learning and improve learning outcomes.

Lastly, we need to remain the answer to ever-changing needs of the learning community.

We want to bring new energy to our longstanding effort to educate thousands of learners across the nation and around the world.

We have not been afraid to be different and be a first mover in the past.

The future

Q *What do you think the higher education landscape will look like in 10 years?*

I am a strong believer in providing choices to learners. The higher education landscape has to be diverse as learners today want varieties to suit their lifestyle.

There will be learners who prefer face-to-face while others prefer blended or online learning. Some universities will still be didactic, others will focus on work-based learning while the rest become hybrid.

The notion of quality and fit for purpose will also evolve and universities will be forced to change either their price structure or offerings to meet these new meanings.

I believe that alternative credentialing pathways, especially badging, will become mainstream in the next few years as more and more universities embrace MOOCs and the like.

I would say that many students in the future will select courses from myriad of providers be they universities or otherwise to obtain badges, thus empowering them to choose not only what they want to study but also the provider.

This DIY (do-it-yourself) degree formula will have far-reaching implications.

I also see more and more collaborative online learning taking place as the millennials and Generation Z join mainstream higher education.

This new breed of students will demand a paradigm shift in teaching and learning.

The notion of classroom will change and learning will be ubiquitous.

Universities must empower students to design and drive their own learning.

The sharing economy and the Internet of things will lead to new approaches to the business of education.

Q *Do you see the university (AeU) as a disruptive force?*

With the university's objectives squarely focused on accessibility, affordability and employability, AeU has consciously taken steps to complement the higher education landscape of the ACD member countries.

In certain markets, AeU is pioneering online and blended-learning methodology, which inevitably makes it a disruptive force.

However, we have always ensured that these new methodologies increase options for the learning communities.

As we move forward into the next phase of AeU's development – AeU 2.0 – we will be introducing new practices, learning options and learning tools.

This will transform the current pedagogical model into one that is based more on a collaborative learning environment that uses open source technology along with open educational resources.

I think a new era is coming – an era that will witness the disruption of the higher education model as we know it today.

■ For more information, call 1300 300 238 or visit *www.aeu.edu.my*.

What inspires you?

I AM most inspired by our learners from all over the world, many of whom have overcome tremendous challenges and barriers in their path to obtaining higher education.

AeU has changed many lives. The impact is felt not only by graduating learners but also the people around them, including the immediate families, communities and industries.

Interacting with our amazing, inspiring learners from all over the world and hearing their great stories of overcoming barriers to obtain a degree truly inspire me.

Learners who have had various hardships and challenges thrown their way deserve the opportunities to get ahead in life through education.

Our learners and their stories humble and inspire me to continue what I'm doing to open up access to higher education. I am a strong believer in education for all.