Discussing flexibility in Asian higher education reminds us of the Indian legend of the six blind men and the elephant. As retold by the nineteenth-century American poet John Godfrey Saxe, the story begins:

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The poem recounts how each man in turn touches part of the elephant, proclaiming it to be a wall (the hide), a spear (the tusk), a snake (the trunk), a fan (the ear), a tree (the leg), and a rope (the tail). It concludes:

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

The moral of the story:

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

(The complete poem is available online.)

Flexibility can be defined as a willingness to change and the ability to bend without actually breaking—characteristics that Asian universities display, but to different degrees and in different ways. As a concept, flexible learning is closely linked to e-learning, which, again, signifies different things in various Asian contexts.

Altbach (2004) observes that Asian higher education operates within an international knowledge network and is therefore influenced by Western curriculum and pedagogical developments. It is also undergoing massification and becoming more diversified and flexible in response to socio-economic development needs. However, in embarking on expansion, innovation, and reform, Asian universities look not only to Western ideas and practices but also to their own traditions, cultures, and internal realities, so flexibility may mean different things in different contexts. India’s Indira Gandhi National Open University and the Open University of Sri Lanka may interpret it as operating open admissions. For the Open University of Israel, flexibility may mean allowing students to design their own programs of study across disciplines. The Open University of Japan may regard itself as flexible in its use of open-learning resources. Cyber universities in the Republic of Korea (Korea hereafter) may see themselves as flexible in individualizing their courseware. The conventional universities may see themselves as becoming more flexible in offering curriculum choice and using information and communication technology (ICT).

**Drivers and Constraints**

The drivers of and constraints on flexibility in Asian higher education vary according to the socio-politico-economic milieu, the culture, and the available technologies.
Socio-politico-economic Milieu

The main driver of flexibility in Asian higher education is the need to achieve rapid expansion while constraining costs. The growth in higher education is far greater than elsewhere in the world, but while Asia has two-thirds of the world’s population (excluding the high-income countries—Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea), it has only 3 percent of the global wealth. Most Asian countries cannot afford to accommodate the vast numbers seeking entry into the conventional institutions. As a consequence, Asia has the world’s largest number of distance learners; seventy open universities; mega-universities such as the Open University of China, India’s Indira Gandhi National Open University, and Turkey’s Anadolu University, collectively catering to millions of students; and an ever-increasing number of public and private dual-mode institutions, virtual/cyber universities, and international online providers/consortia. Demand for entry at some of these institutions—for example, Anadolu University—is overwhelmingly from school leavers unable to enter the conventional universities. By contrast, about 50 percent of the distance students enrolled with the Open University of Japan, 70 percent of those at Pakistan’s Allama Iqbal Open University, and 95 percent of those studying at Indonesia’s Universitas Terbuka are mature, employed students.

Students in Western countries who opt for off-campus or online study generally do so because of the flexibility factor. Most Asian distance-education students would prefer to study face to face at conventional institutions, but they have no choice. They can take heart from the fact that the pressures to increase higher-education participation are resulting in more flexible admissions. China’s Radio and Television Universities and the Open University of Japan require students entering degree programs to pass the national higher-education entrance exams, but they waive this requirement for non-degree programs. Applicants for Turkey’s Anadolu University must pass the university-entrance exam, but their grades can be lower than the cut-off points set by the conventional universities. Entry requirements are also relaxed for some degree programs at Indira Gandhi National Open University and the Open University of Hong Kong. The University of the Philippines Open University takes account of the work experience of applicants lacking the minimum entry scores. The Open University of Israel (OUI) waives matriculation or certification from
other educational institutions, and having gained credit for clusters of undergraduate courses, students can continue studying through OU1 or another university.

Distance education can be used to provide for learners in the furthest corners of vast countries such as China and India, and for high-density populations in cities such as Hong Kong and Tokyo. Capacity to do this varies across Asia. Countries such as Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and India lead the way; the West Asian countries are only just beginning to adopt these methods; and countries such as Mongolia and Myanmar are lagging in provision.

Another driver of flexibility in higher education is the move away from government control. Universities in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore are no longer directly administered by the government. Responsibility for curriculum, pedagogy, e-learning, and inter-institutional collaboration has been delegated to higher-education councils or individual universities. In other countries such as Taiwan, public-university presidents are no longer Ministry of Education appointees but are selected by the universities. In Japan, with the aim of increasing competition and enhancing standards, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) requires the national universities to be “independent corporations,” responsible for their own budgets and staffing. In exchange for this administrative freedom, their funding is dependent upon performance. Also embracing market-driven competition policies, the South Korean government encourages the universities to establish strategic partnerships with the private sector and the world’s leading research universities: for example, between the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and between Seoul National University, Tokyo University, Peking University, and Hanoi University.

Some Asian governments still exercise greater control over their universities than do Western governments, and the adoption of more flexible-learning systems often depends upon legislative change and protracted negotiations with bureaucracies. Vietnam’s Hanoi Open University cannot offer any of its courses without the approval of the Ministry of Education and Training. In Japan, MEXT only authorizes the Open University of Japan and forty-two universities designated as “correspondence institutions” to
offer programs without face-to-face components, and conventional universities are only permitted to provide up to sixty of the required 124 credits through distance learning (Latchem and Jung 2010).

**Culture**

It is difficult to generalize about Asian cultures because they are shaped by so many different belief systems, physical geographies, and socio-economic circumstances. Moreover, countries once subject to Western colonialism have hybrid or bi-cultural frameworks, and globalization is accentuating the intercultural process.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) developed five cultural-dimension rankings to explain differences in behaviour between people in different countries. These are power distance (acceptance of inequality by both leaders and followers); individualism (people standing up for themselves and expressing personal viewpoints); masculinity (distribution of roles by gender); long-term orientation (valuing thrift and perseverance); and uncertainty avoidance (unease in ambiguous or unstructured situations). Most Asian cultures are regarded as high in power distance and low in individualism, but there the similarities end. Japan is considered high in masculinity, while Korea and Thailand are seen as low. China and Hong Kong are high in masculinity and low in uncertainty avoidance, whereas Malaysia is high in uncertainty avoidance and relatively low in masculinity. Korea and Japan are high in long-term orientation, but the Philippines is low in this dimension. It is important to use Hofstede and Hofstede’s model with some caution, while recognizing that introducing more flexible management systems, organizational relationships, and teaching and learning methods may run counter to some of the accepted orthodoxies of Asian countries.

Using pedagogy as an example, Asian learners are more familiar with the transmission model of education than the kinds of interactions and challenges to thinking in Western-style student-centred, constructivist flexible learning. The teachings of Confucius held that the teacher’s role was to transmit knowledge and the learners’ responsibility was to accept and learn everything the teacher taught. In the Islamic world, the time-honoured duty of the teacher has been to teach the text of the Qur’an, the sacredness of which renders independent learning inappropriate.
India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, the term guru—which in Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism signifies one with great knowledge, wisdom, and authority—is widely used to mean teacher. So, not altogether surprisingly, many Asian students prefer to faithfully follow the teacher or text, and value learning that involves memorization, sequenced repetition, structured review, and closure-orientation (Zhenhui 2001). They are also often reluctant to question or express viewpoints on what is being taught. This may be attributable to the “collective” nature of Asian cultures, which leads to an aversion to public disagreement or the learners’ concern that they may have insufficiently mastered the content. At home and school, they have been taught to “think one more time before talking”; as they say in Korea, “Even a fish wouldn’t get into trouble if it kept its mouth shut.”

Asian cultures are also described as high-context (Hall 1992). Communications in Asian cultures are less direct and assertive than in the low-context Western cultures. Low-context cultures rely on the spoken and written word to convey meaning. In high-context cultures, meaning and context are equally important and non-verbal communications play an important role. This is why so many so-called e-learning programs in countries such as Japan, Korea, and China take the form of television broadcast, streamed video, and DVD-recorded or video-conferenced lectures. Being able to see and hear the teachers, they feel less deprived of their teachers’ academic and social presence.

E-learning serves a different function in Saudi Arabia, where women can never be seen unveiled in public by men. In all universities save the new King Abdullah Science and Technology University, male and female students study on separate campuses and the use of video conferencing and online learning enables female students to see, hear, and interact with the male lecturers while remaining hidden from their gaze and that of their male counterparts.

A combination of the power-distance factor, pressures of time, and large distance-education classes leads many Asian lecturers to ignore the interactive capabilities of ICT and to repackage their traditional lectures online. As the World Bank (2008) observes of the Arab world (although the observation applies equally well in other parts of Asia), teacher-led instruction is considered “quality education,” and ICT simply a means of information transmission.
The above observations indicate why Western concepts of flexible learning—providing choice in the what and how of learning, varied learning environments, and opportunities to share ideas with others through discussion boards, chat rooms, and so on—force the Asian learner into radically different and sometimes discomfiting learning environments. For example, Al-Harthi (2005) found that Arab distance-education students in the United States liked the anonymity of online learning but still expected their teachers to define the rules and procedures, and to initiate interactions; they were reluctant to make unsolicited contributions or to ask for clarifications, and in the absence of teachers, they could abstain from learning and postpone assignments.

Given the collective nature of Asian cultures, it is important to ensure a sense of “teaching presence” through well-presented and clearly structured content and of “social presence” through interaction with tutors and other students. Belenky et al. (1986) distinguish between “connected knowing,” an appreciative, empathetic, sharing, non-confrontational style of learning, and “separate knowing,” a detached, impersonal, objective, critical style of learning. Asian learners prefer the former, so it is important to foster a sense of community and encourage small-group learning. Some Asian institutions manage to achieve this despite their large enrolments and limited numbers of tutors by encouraging voluntary study groups. The Korea National Open University has over seven hundred such student-formed groups, and more than 40 percent of KOOU students participate in these. Meeting weekly for two-hour evening sessions, they work through material prepared by group members, more advanced students, graduates, or lecturers, thus gaining a feeling of togetherness and improving motivation, confidence, retention, and performance (Jung et al. 1995).

Cultural differences may also be reflected in the amount of non-work time people give to the various media. According to the NOP World Culture Score™ Media Habits Index (2005), the global weekly averages are: television viewing, 16.6 hours; listening to the radio, 8.0 hours; reading, 6.5 hours; and non-work-related computer and Internet usage, 8.9 hours. At 22.4 hours a week, the Thais are the world’s most avid television viewers. Indians spend more time reading than anyone else in the world, averaging 10.7 hours per week, while the least partial to reading are the Japanese
(4.1 hours per week) and the Koreans (3.1 hours per week). The Chinese spend the least amount of time listening to the radio (2.1 hours per week), and neither is radio especially popular with the Koreans and the Saudis (3.0 and 3.9 hours per week, respectively). The Taiwanese spend the most time on their computers, averaging 12.6 hours per week, closely followed by the Thais, at 11.7 hours per week. In selecting media for flexible learning, it may be advisable to consider these different dispositions.

Some cultures also seem more ready to adapt and change than others. For example, the South Korean government has been exceedingly proactive in encouraging and supporting new cyber universities, university consortia, and e-learning, and, as a consequence, “virtual learning” is entering the mass adoption stage (Bonk 2004). By contrast, Japan, a country that outwardly appears to have much in common with Korea, has largely failed to embrace education reform and e-transformation because the openness, flexibility, and bottom-up approaches needed for these are incompatible both with the bureaucratic regulatory approaches of the Japanese government and with the hierarchical tendencies and opaqueness of the universities (Bachnik 2005; Latchem et al. 2008).

**Technology and Access**

In East, South, and Central Asia, the overall Internet penetration rate as a percentage of the population is 14 percent compared with 21.9 percent in the rest of the world. However, the 2000–2008 overall growth rate in Internet usage was 363.4 percent compared with 255.9 percent in the rest of the world. Some of the growth rates—for example, Vietnam’s 9,979.8 percent and Pakistan’s 12,969.5 percent—bode well for the future. The comparable penetration rate in West Asia is 21.3 percent, with the 2000–2008 usage growth rate of 1,176.8 percent. However, enormous variation exists between countries. Internet penetration rates for Korea and Hong Kong are around 70 percent, but in Bangladesh and Iraq, they are only 0.2 to 0.3 percent. Also, some users have broadband access, while others only have dial-up.

It is one thing to have the necessary infrastructure but quite another to have achieved a state of what the Economist Intelligence Unit (2008) terms “e-readiness”—that is, the preparedness to adopt, exploit, and make changes to maximize the potential of ICT—and “e-learning
readiness”—the extent to which countries and their educational systems utilize ICT. The EIU finds that the strong leadership displayed by governments in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea is propelling them upwards in their e-readiness world rankings. In contrast, despite its hi-tech reputation and world-class ICT infrastructure, the governmental and institutional conservatism and rigidity of thinking noted earlier are leaving Japan behind in e-transformation (Latchem et al. 2009).

Western Asia has been similarly slow to move into e-learning. Khafagi (2004) attributes this to the problems and high costs of Internet and broadband connection and the lack of instructional-design expertise. These conditions also apply in many of the poorer, socially disadvantaged, and remote regions of Asia. Cultural mindsets also explain adherence to inflexible modes of teaching and learning. For example, in Nepal and Bhutan, there is still a strong preference for traditional modes of teaching and learning, as well as suspicion about the quality and status of open and distance learning (Rennie and Mason 2007).

Asia has over one billion of the world’s 2.7 billion mobile phone users and the world’s fastest growth in subscribers. Many Asians, especially the younger generation, have advanced skills in using mobiles, personal digital assistants (PDAs), short message service (SMS), tweeting, and social networks, all of which offer new means of providing flexible learning. In their trial use of these technologies, institutions such as the City University of Hong Kong, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and University of the Philippines Open University have found that students often prefer m-learning (mobile learning) to personal computer-based learning and that PDAs and smartphones can enhance student performance. Mobiles are also a readily accessible, inexpensive, and reliable means of providing flexible student-teacher contact in countries like India where the postal systems can be slow and unreliable, and computers and landline telephones are too costly and inaccessible. Given the popularity of and the pioneering work in exploiting mobiles, iPods, and PDAs, Baggaley (2007) surmises that Asia may very well become a world leader in m-learning.

The growing popularity of learning objects and open courseware is another indicator of flexibility in Asian higher education. Asian universities are members of the OpenCourseWare Consortium (www.ocwconsortium.org),
and national initiatives are under way in co-developing and sharing Web- and video-based courseware. For example, Universitas Terbuka, Sukhotai Thammathirat Open University, Allama Iqbal Open University, the International University of Cambodia, the Open University of Hong Kong, and others are developing a digital depository of learning objects for sharing among Asian institutions.

CONCLUSION

Flexibility is evident in Asian higher education but has differing realities according to culture and geography, and whether the view is top-down or bottom-up. Westerners may see video conferencing used to overcome gender separation on Saudi campuses as a symptom of denying women’s freedom. In the Kingdom, it is taken as a sign of government commitment to providing better higher-education opportunities for females. Distance-education students in Western cultures may find all the ideas and information they need in the course texts and may consider “talking head” educational television boring and superfluous to their needs. Asian students may find televisied and video-conferenced lectures essential to their understanding of the course content and the lecturer’s expectations.

The fable of the blind men and the elephant teaches us that people perceive phenomena in different ways, ways that may or may not be correct. It also reminds us that we can gain from seeing things as others see them and should not be blindly attached to one set of perceptions. Every culture needs to define flexibility within its own philosophical, theoretical, and operational framework, but it also needs to be open and sensitive to cross-cultural issues.

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**About the Authors**

After naïvely believing that audiovisual aids and programmed learning held all the answers, and later, that the theory and practice of educational technology encompassed everything, experience showed Colin Latchem that change takes longer than anticipated, selecting the right technologies/methodologies is akin to hitting moving targets, and success is never guaranteed. His work as manager, consultant, and researcher in open, distance, and e-learning in the UK, Australia, and around the globe has helped him to realize that the inherent strengths and weaknesses of each means of flexible learning, the kinds of teaching and learning the students are accustomed to, and the ever-present organizational and cultural factors need to be fully comprehended and considered. Forty years before
Teaching moral education in the 1980s, Insung Jung was frustrated by the answer to every moral question being set down in the textbook, the children having only to memorize these answers to pass their exams, and the boredom and bad behaviour displayed whenever she tried something different. So she took these kids outside to assess “good” and “bad” behaviours in the general public, asked them to interview people on ethical matters, played television dramas presenting moral dilemmas in class, and got them to present their findings in various media. Immediately, she found that the children were giving serious thought to moral issues, discussing issues beyond the set text, and coming up with some exciting, original thoughts. It was this experience that triggered Insung’s lifelong interest in flexible learning. She is a Professor in Education, Media and Society at the International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, Japan. http://epiaget.com/