

Has distance education a future?

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I posed this question both in response to the focus of this conference and because there do seem to me to be a number of developments that strongly suggest the nature, perhaps the distinctive role, of distance education will change and some of its valued characteristics may be lost. It would seem ludicrous to suggest that distance education per se will disappear altogether, but what its future might be could be problematic.

A caveat is necessary. In this, as in so much of the discussion about distance provision, the circumstances prevailing in developing nations are different from those that currently operate in the West. It is unlikely that the great open universities of emerging nations are under any threat in the foreseeable future. I contend, however, that the discussion I am about to embark on, centred on developed countries as it is, may well have longer term implications even for these bastions of conventional distance education practice. Of course, developing nations are not all of a kind. Practices in some countries already show signs of the changes discussed below.

What are the likely scenarios? There seem at least four: (1) maintenance of the status quo, (2) a new and positive role resulting from changing contextual pressures, (3) diminution as a form of provision through rapidly accelerating disaggregation of functions, and (4) a loss of identity. I would like to consider each of these separately, although there is clear overlap between the concerns raised under each scenario, despite their different emphases.

Maintenance of the status quo

At its most simple, this perspective on the future of distance education presumes things will remain reasonably the same as at present. That is, the fundamental assumptions that govern distance education will remain unchanged and the way we deliver our current range of educational services will continue to improve.

Some of the practitioners that hold this view will make contributions to the literature foreshadowing a new stage in the development of the field, perhaps arguing that technology will transform our capacity to offer existing services in ways that they are more comprehensive, more immediate, and more directly responsive to the demands of our students, and this will occur on such a scale that we can consider ourselves to have achieved a new level or generation of distance delivery.

This is in keeping with one of the traditions of the discourse of distance education, ie an essentially naïve optimism that sees things in terms of linear development. I suspect there is also a strong underlying thread of complacency in this perspective, and I see this borne out time and time again in conference presentations, journal articles, and in the proliferation of academic publications that recycle familiar views of our practice. Why should this be so? I suspect in part it derives from a strong conviction that in contrast to conventional face to face teaching, distance education has by and large got things right. That is, circumstances have required that our planning is stronger, our teaching resources significantly more developed, our support for students more conscious, our administrative systems more respectful of the contexts within which students pursue their learning, and so on. Now, at one level, I don't disagree with aspects of this view. But things are really not that straight-forward. At times, we have fallen into error, such as the judgement in the 'eighties that quality was principally a characteristic of study materials, ie of the product rather than the outcomes of the learning process. It is dismaying to see a similar position adopted in relation to online study resources at the moment. Often too, we ignored the contradictions between the components of our industrialised model. For example, while we put considerable effort into student support systems, often our administrative arrangements were overwhelmingly response to Institutional requirements rather than student needs and frequently disempowered those who relied on our support.

Because of these complexities, the view that our future is one of almost inevitable improvement, secured in the main through technological advances, constitutes an unlikely scenario. On the one hand, it is unquestionably the case that the application of information and communication technologies to distance delivery will make some things more efficient, cost effective, extend the range of services we offer students, and sometimes enhance the quality of the educational experience. But there is a downside. Inequalities between the technological haves and have-nots will increase. Developments may well be driven by technologists and business interests, rather than educators. Where, for example, are the educators working on the development of reusable learning objects? (Standing well behind the purveyors of commercially available content and information systems theorists, would seem to be the answer.) Again, to take a very practical example, what is the educational rationale for the Thompson publishing empire having a half interest in Universitas 21? Or, previously, Rupert Murdoch?

Complacency will be the downfall of the status quo option. The context is changing. Technological developments are giving rise to a form of distance education in Japan, the United States, and China that is essentially about replicating the experience of conventional face to face on-campus provision for groups who attend at locations remote from the main teaching campus and have an educational experience mediated by such technologies as video-conferencing. Why does that matter? First, it is a repudiation of the distinctive contribution of distance education as it has evolved elsewhere,

predicated on delivery to individuals in ways that are convenient to them. Second, and relatedly, it involves a loss of the value position that came to us through the open education movement, involving an empowering transfer of responsibility for the management of learning from teacher to taught. This was most often manifest in a freedom from the constraints of time and place which gave considerable flexibility to certain kinds of student, especially those in work, who suffered from constraining disabilities, or who had domestic responsibilities. This distributed education model is not distance education as I know and value it. It may well suit the interests of some students but I believe it is more about what conservative academics think is important in teaching and learning. We cannot assume things will just keep on getting better. From my value position, they may well get a whole lot worse.

There are other trends as a result of technological developments that will also impact on the maintenance of the distance education status quo. These will be taken up in the final section, *A Loss of Identity*.

A new and positive role

At UniSA, Ted Nunan (2000) drawing on earlier work by another colleague, Jane Kenway (1995), has put together an interesting argument about the future of distance education based on its location at the nexus of formal education, developments in information and communications technology, and the emerging markets for higher education goods and services. In the paragraphs that follow, I draw heavily on Nunan, but twist his scholarship to my own purposes.

Government decisions have pushed Western universities into global competition for international students, exploiting the unmet demand in many developing countries. Countries like Malaysia, too, are seeking over time to become net exporters of educational services. The logistics of delivering higher education transnationally (ie from one country to another) require resource-based delivery strategies, constraints on face-to-face interaction between staff and students, increasing reliance on quick and reliable communication technologies, scaleable teaching models that accommodate larger class sizes than in conventional university teaching, systematic forms of student support, and the advantages of economies of scale. None of these is unfamiliar to distance educators, but they turn conventional on-campus delivery on its head.

The entry of distance education into transnational settings is fostered by a number of assumptions about this form of delivery in the market place. For example, distance education:

- has more marketable components than conventional face to face delivery,
- affords greater choices for intending students,

- can be tailored to market demand in specific areas,
- can be manipulated to create value for money for specific services that suit market pressures,
- has traditional components, such as quality course materials and a service culture, that produce market advantage, and
- has the technical expertise to compete for students globally.

(Adapted from Nunan, 2000:5)

If we accept that distance education is poised to be at the vanguard of emerging transnational markets in higher education, we need also to acknowledge that this will be at the cost of incurring certain critical changes. For example, distance education:

- will fragment and pursue specialisation through disaggregation of educational delivery faster than on-campus approaches to delivery, and this will in turn lead it into new kinds of partnerships in the educational enterprise,
- will capitalise on the blurring of educational sectors and seek to service vertical markets in education, drawing on the capacity of ICTs to support vocational education and training, second language instruction, foundation courses and tertiary preparation programs as well as higher education,
- will become more service oriented than conventional universities, and exploit the capacities of call centres, regional support providers, mass textbook suppliers, and international quality assurance and accrediting agencies, and
- will use developments in the technologies applied in other fields to build a range of services that have market potential, e.g. career guidance and professional placement services.

(Adapted from Nunan, 2000:6-7)

In short, distance education will enable universities to re-engineer aspects of their educational delivery to take advantage of the increasing transnational markets of the developing and developed nations. My own institution, the University of South Australia, has done precisely this to become the largest provider of off-shore university education in Australia.

Diminution through Disaggregation

The positive position put by Ted Nunan and reported above, has its downside. In the previous discussion, the movement towards disaggregation and new partnerships was foreshadowed. This can be a very difficult process for universities: costly in terms of time and money, challenging to traditional notions of institutional autonomy, and involve yielding aspects of the distance education delivery system which may well have contributed to

institutional reputation in the past. I will be discussing this in some detail in a paper to be presented at the ICDE Conference in Hong Kong, February 2003, (King, 2003) and won't rehearse the argument here, other than to take up the last point.

As I argue in the next section, a large part of the success of distance teaching institutions has been the infrastructure, both for administration and student support, they have developed to service students who do not attend on-campus. Transnational education necessarily involves yielding some aspects of those systems to other providers, often for very practical reasons. For example, the processes of recruitment, registration and enrolment are much easier to effect *in situ*, rather than from the home country. The logistical systems on which our delivery systems depend, such as reliable postal services and uncompromised Internet, may simply be unavailable, even in quite developed countries. Student support is more readily available through a local partner institution than from the home campus. Tuition is far less costly if qualified local academics engage with students rather than staff who are obliged to travel from their own country.

It is already commonplace for institutions working offshore to partner with specialist providers of diverse elements in the total range of distance education. For example, although UniSA has its own reliable online teaching and learning platform, we cannot operate in countries that are protected by government-imposed firewalls and thus require the assistance of a partner with servers inside those countries. The question then becomes whether the demands of maintaining participation in two online systems is cost-effective. In our Division of Business and Enterprise, slightly more than half the total enrolment is international rather than domestic. So, the issue has some force. At some stage, we may well have to yield our home-grown product, UniSANet, for the platform employed by our partner.

At its most basic, the situation is that specialist providers can often do better what universities with a distance mission have assumed was their exclusive prerogative. This can include quite significant academic functions, such as the production of learning resources. The open courseware movement is but one indication of the pressures institutions will have to confront.

My university is in a number of alliances for distance delivery, both on and offshore, that involve other parties providing some or all of the following: promotion and publicity, handling initial enquiries through a call centre, recruitment, initial program counselling, registration and enrolment, distribution of study resources, local tuition and ongoing student support, some formative assessment, some quality assurance processes, recruitment of academic tutors, provision of study centres and computing facilities, and monitoring of student progress. At very least, this posits quite new roles for the University, and confronts many aspects of the academic culture which until recently would have been regarded as inviolable.

I am responsible for a distance education operation that employs no editors or instructional designers, produces no print materials, has no dedicated counselling or advisory functions, and provides no specialist distance education academic support services. Yet our distance students persevere, express reasonably high levels of satisfaction with their experience of the University and have a retention and success rate not very different from on-campus students or students at more typical distance teaching institutions. However, many of our staff, both academic and administrative, have found the changes very hard to bear and sometimes strongly resisted them. In a less corporately managed university, this may well have led to a lengthy period of instability.

A Loss of Identity'

Technological change has the potential to impact on our distinctive role well beyond the systems issues considered above.

It is worth considering some of the elements that have made distance education a distinctive and worthy component of overall university provision:

- a separation of teacher and taught
- an industrialised model of resource production
- a reliance on technology to facilitate delivery
- recourse to a package of study resources
- an approach to teaching that was responsive to the study milieu of students, often through an individualised approach to instruction
- a value position that emphasized freedom from the constraints of time and place in study
- a distinctive administration, predicated on dealing with people who did not attend on campus
- a systematic form of student support, often with centralised components and decentralised tutorials,
- a costing model that differed from conventional face to face forms of delivery, involving economies of scale
- typically, more transparent approaches to course delivery and the student experience, and
- a commitment to access and equity

By way of contrast, much face to face education involved:

- teacher dominated transmission models of content delivery
- the academic as content expert rather than teacher
- the primacy of disciplinary expertise in determining the nature of the educational experience
- group based approaches to teaching
- the transient nature of many of the teaching arrangements
- an eschewing of technology other than textbooks, a whiteboard and printed handouts

- administration unrelated to the nature of the teaching and learning experience, and
- student support couched in terms of the academic experience (in the form of further teaching in tutorials) or the remedial (study support for students who were seen to be failing or at risk in the teaching-learning transactions).

What we are seeing now is that distinctions between distance education and on-campus teaching arrangements are blurring, particularly as more conventional face-to-face programs employ computer-aided instruction and invoke the resources of the Internet and World Wide Web. Many of the features identified above that characterised distance delivery will become commonplace in on-campus teaching. In contrast, many of the recent developments in distance education facilitated by technological developments, such as online study support workshops, will become available to any student who can access the Web, regardless of where and when they study. The movement is all to the mainstream.

So, in terms particularly of the presentation of content, assessment activity, communication between teacher and taught and amongst students, and administration and student support, there will be less that is distinctive about distance education. For example, at UnISA, teachers in campus-based programs are using the capacity of the library to digitise readings with the consequence that some students feel no need to visit the library physically. Both on and off-campus teaching will involve a wider range of delivery strategies, but the net effect will be to reduce reliance on the components that distinguish them.

Second, online delivery allows any university teacher to become a quasi-distance educator and increasingly more and more academics are putting resources online. This, too, obviates the need for on-campus attendance to some degree. Unfortunately, much of the work of early enthusiasts bears many of the characteristics of cottage industries, particularly in the replication of development work and the adoption of production strategies that do not lead to mass application and involve unrealistic labour costings. Nonetheless, there is sometimes the perverse argument that this constitutes a reason for disregarding conventional distance education commitments. Put simply, the argument runs: if the new technologies allow anyone to be a distance educator, involving a form of educational delivery you contend is so successful, why would you want to stop this development?

Third, distance education is largely successful because of the systems developed to manage its disparate elements. The take-up of incompatible technical platforms and software by individuals – a characteristic of the experience of many Universities as they move to flexible delivery – quickly outstrips institutional capacity to service those diverse environments. Again, this can be used against distance education: if the support infrastructure of distance education cannot service the various approaches individuals are

taking, then why not dismantle it and use the resources thus saved in other ways?

The answer to both challenges identified above in part lies in experience. Individual innovators tire rapidly of the effort required to be both educator and technologist and soon look to systemic processes for handling what moves from being interesting on first experience to repetitious subsequently. There is a further argument about the costs of proliferation. One reason for our sophisticated production and delivery systems were the economies of scale they permitted. The consequence for an institution that allows a thousand flowers to bloom is that with time, so many wither and fade.

Fourth, in developed countries where labour costs are high, the new technologies are turning the conventional costing assumptions of distance education upside down. If we assume that conventional distance education can be cost effective because, although it tends to have high initial fixed costs, its variable costs are relatively low (depending on choices about methodology) and fixed costs can be amortized over large intakes and time, then we need to think what the introduction of an online dimension to teaching and learning does. In my experience, even in a well-managed system, both fixed and variable costs increase. On the one hand, despite the lowering of computer costs, it is still the case that providing the hardware, software, support systems, and the training to develop quality online teaching resources adds significantly to their cost. Variable costs, i.e. those associated with delivery to students, also increase because the technology allows students much greater access to teaching staff, who in developed nations are the largest cost component of educational expenditure. In my own university, we have accepted that moving online is not a cost-cutting measure, but an attempt to add value for students by improving the range of services we offer them. It is about improving quality rather than reducing cost.

The scenario outlined above is fairly pessimistic and deliberately so. I want to challenge the view that our distinctiveness and special contribution to overall educational provision is so unique that it will necessarily prevail. If I may reflect on my own institution for a moment, I see evidence all around me that what was once the preserve of the distance education component of our dual mode operation is becoming mainstreamed for all students. For example, we have closed the administrative center established to service distance education students exclusively. Those students access support from a central administrative agency that offers assistance to any student, regardless of the mode of their enrolment. This is part of a deliberate strategy of providing more flexible delivery for all students, but the point is that the technology now encourages certain changes. If we work to implement them successfully, everyone benefits. If we ignore them, our relevance gradually subsides.

For example, at UniSA:

- Every program and every course has a home-page with course-specific resources on it.
- Over 1200 courses, on and off-campus, have substantial online study resources.
- All students and staff –about 37,000 persons – have an email account on the same system.
- All students can access a comprehensive range of online study support at any time of night or day, all year round, from any location with web-access.
- All students enroll down to the level of tutorial groups online. In the first year of this system, 77% of continuing and 40% of new students enrolled online from off-campus.
- All students can access any information the University holds about them online, from registration details to exam results, to overdue library books and parking fines.
- Any student can submit an assignment electronically from anywhere in the World and have its submission acknowledged automatically.
- Our career service is almost totally online and averages about 3,000 hits per week.
- UniSAnet, our online teaching and learning environment, averages 2 million hits per month. The University of South Australia website is the most visited educational website of any kind in Australia.

If this looks like an active distance education operation, it is worth remembering that we are dual-mode institution and the proportion of distance students within the total student population is about 16%.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this paper is suggest that the forces that impinge on distance education, particularly those deriving from technological change, are inevitably going to alter the field as we know it. There are both positive and negative possible scenarios about our future as a field, but solid grounds for considering that incremental improvement from where we are now is unlikely. For each alternative, I have tried to indicate that there are both positive and negative dimensions.

My own preferred position is for distance educators to become the vanguard of change within the higher education field generally, using their specialist

expertise, demonstrable track record of responsiveness to students, and understanding of the importance of planned and well-delivered resource-based education to lead our colleagues to a situation where all university provision is characterized by values of openness, the flexible delivery of programs, and coordinated administrative and support systems that are congruent with our educational purposes. If distance education functions are going to be mainstreamed within overall university provision, then let our experience and skills be used to shape these developments intelligently and with sensitivity to the needs of all students.

¹ Some of what follows is drawn from a paper presented in Moscow in 2000.

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