

# The future of distance education and the role of ODLAA

I want to do a number of things in this presentation. First, and for the sake of our guests, I thought it might be helpful to talk about what we understand by the term 'distance education'. Second, I am going to outline some possibilities for the future of this approach to educational delivery. Finally, I want to make some comments about the connection between those possible futures and how they might shape the concerns and activities of our organisation as a professional body.

The first thing to say is that there are various names given to what I call distance education. In the past there has been correspondence education, external studies, extra-mural studies and so on. At present, schools tend to talk about open education, the vocational education sector calls the same thing flexible delivery, and universities use distance education, flexible delivery and – when they are getting it really wrong – online education. Now there are arguments about all these titles and I don't think they mean the same thing at all, but the point is that they are used as though they were synonymous. So what I want to do is look at some of the features that characterise our practice to get a commonsense understanding of what we are all talking about.

What has made distance education a distinctive and worthy form of educational provision?

- a separation of teacher and taught
- use of a package of study resources to deliver content and learning exercises
- an industrialised model of resource production
- a reliance on technology to facilitate delivery
- an approach to teaching that was responsive to the students' learning situations, 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).

In a paper presented to the Cambridge Open and Distance Education Conference in September<sup>i</sup> I outlined four likely scenarios for our field: (1) maintenance of the status quo, (2) a new and positive role focussed on transnational involvements, (3) diminution of the field through disaggregation of function, and (4) loss of identity. In a sense, these really constitute only two options, because the third and fourth are extensions of the second, although we might be able to avoid moving to them. Today I am revisiting that position to consider issues that might come before this review meeting.

I am not going to argue these scenarios at length, but merely indicate some features and point to possible implications for ODLAA.

### ***Maintenance of the status quo***

Fundamentally, this position suggests things will remain much the same for distance education, that the fundamental assumptions that govern our practice will remain unchanged and the way we deliver our current range of services will continue to improve. I think this is too optimistic, naïve and underpinned by a strong element of complacency.

The position probably derives from a view that, in contrast with face-to-face delivery, 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 students, and so on. I tend to agree, but there have been mistakes, eg our focus in the 80s on quality as a characteristic of study materials rather than student learning outcomes.

Technological developments will make some of the things we do more efficient and cost-effective, extend the range of our services, and sometimes enhance the quality of the learning experience. But it will open up other options, like the distributed education models of the US, Japan, and parts of China which are essentially about replicating the conventions and assumptions of face-to-face provision using technologies such as video-conferencing. Does this matter? Yes, if you consider a key value of distance education as deriving from the delivery of education to individuals in ways convenient to them, or the empowering transfer of responsibility for the management of learning from teacher to student.

*Key issues for me that arise from this are (1) advocacy of distance education as a convenient form of educational delivery to individuals, and we need to explore the various forms and contexts in which such convenience can be demonstrated – at home, at work, in rural and remote areas, overseas, within bounded institutions like hospitals and prisons, and so on,*

*(2) arguing the political dimension of open education, ie student-centredness, or the creation of choice for students in how, when and where they learn, with a concomitant expectation they will exercise greater responsibility for their own learning, which matches the expectations that business and the professions have of those they seek to employ, and*

*(3) we have to acknowledge that for some individuals, their programs will be negotiated by organisations on their behalf, and so we need to identify the situations within which distance delivery will suit the organisational customers of education, eg hospitals, correctional services, large corporate enterprises with staff development needs, professional associations, and so on. None of this last point is very new, but I believe we have to strengthen our public claim to a role in this area. In particular, we need to assert that technological developments alone – devoid of educational understanding – will not serve these needs.*

### **A new and positive role in transnational education**

Nunan (2002) and Kenway (1995) have put together an interesting argument about the role for distance education because of its location at the nexus of formal education, developments in ICTs, and emerging international markets for educational goods and services.

Governments are pushing educational providers into global competition, exploiting unmet demand in developing nations. The logistics of delivering education offshore (principally vocational and higher education) require resource-based delivery strategies, constraints on face-to-face interaction, increasing reliance on quick and reliable communication technologies, scalable teaching models, systematic forms of student support, and economies of scale. This is familiar to distance education, but turns conventional delivery on its head.

The costs of this approach will be that distance education incurs certain critical changes: (1) disaggregation of function and use of specialist partners to deliver services, (2) blurring of educational sectors and the emergence of vertical markets, (3) a greater orientation to service, again involving specialist partners, eg call centres, and (4) use of technologies to build other services that have market potential, eg career placement.

*The issues for me in this are that ODLAA needs to (1) understand and guide developments in transnational delivery, (2) critically reflect on the process of disaggregation in education and promote good models of practice, (3) advocate articulation between the sectors of education that reflect the needs of international consumers in comprehensive service models (which no one else is doing!), and (4) describe an approach to educational delivery that reflects an elaborated concept of service provision in all areas that impinge on learning for individual growth and societal need.*

### **Diminution through disaggregation**

Disaggregation is hard for educational institutions, costly in terms of time and money, challenging to traditional notions of authority in education, requiring skills – such as business analysis and project management – not widely evident in current providers, and confronting in that it involves yielding authority over matters which

may have contributed to institutional reputation in the past. I just want to focus on this last point.

A large part of the success of distance providers has been the infrastructure, both for administration and student support, developed to support students who do not come to the school, college or campus. Transnational education necessarily involves yielding some aspects of these systems to other providers, for reasons of cost, cultural adaptation, and efficiency. My institution has offshore partners that provide some or all of the following: promotion and publicity, handling initial inquiries 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. This confronts many aspects of the academic culture that would until recently have been regarded as inviolable. Some staff have found these changes very hard to bear and sometimes strongly resisted them. In a less corporately run institution, this may well have led to a period of instability.

*The issues for me in this are that: (1) we have to argue for new – and perhaps radically different – models of teaching and program delivery that are defensible in terms of service to students, rather than institutional past practice, (2) we need clear views on the essential services that determine educational integrity for a provider and understand what other services can be provided by partners on the basis of their specialist expertise, and (3) we need to search for better opportunities to serve students that are delivered through new uses of technology rather than based on staff activity.*

### **A loss of identity**

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 at the beginning of this paper 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.

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. 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 20 million hits per month. The University of South Australia website is one of the most visited educational websites 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%.

*What are the implications in this for us? We need to be really clear about where we make a distinctive contribution and which potential students will best be served through distance forms of delivery.*

*ODLAA also needs to become the advocate of positive change in education generally. We need to use*

- *our 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 teaching is characterized by*

- *values of openness,*
- *the flexible delivery of programs, and*
- *coordinated administrative and support systems that are congruent with our educational purposes.*

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<sup>i</sup> King, B., 'Has distance education a future', invited keynote to 10<sup>th</sup> Biennial Cambridge Conference on Open and Distance Education, Maddingley Hall, Cambridge, September 22-26, 2003.