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From continuing education to lifelong learning: distance learning

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How to cite:

Peters, Geoff (1997). From continuing education to lifelong learning: distance learning. In: From Continuing Education to Lifelong Learning: a Review of UACE Strategy and Objectives, Occasional paper, UACE, pp. 53–60.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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UACE seminar
From Continuing Education to Lifelong learning-Distance Learning

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Introduction

Open and distance learning in its various guises has a long history in the UK. The London University external programme which was established in 1858 offered opportunities for students to gain qualifications by providing access to its curricular descriptions and examinations. By 1887 the University Correspondence College (now part of the National Extension College) provided tuition for London examination candidates by post.

More recently the 25 years since the first Open University students commenced their studies has seen distance education grow to a point where only 13 UK Universities have neither registered their distance learning programme on the International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL) database nor responded positively to the 1994 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey of distance education. It would be surprising if some of the remaining [Buckingham, Bristol, Central Lancashire, Abertay Dundee, East Anglia, Essex, Nottingham, Oxford, Sussex, York, Teeside and UMIST.) are not now involved in some form of distance education.

Open and Distance Learning Definitions

The term distance education has in most of Europe usually been superseded by terms such as Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and in the UK labels like Open Learning, Flexible learning, and Open and Flexible learning (OFL) are also used.

Where a distinction is deliberately drawn between 'open' and 'distance', then distance education is taken to be about methods and technology from an institutional standpoint whereas open learning starts from the flexibility experienced by the learner.

The literature of distance education contains many attempts at definition, amongst which Keegan(1980), who drew on earlier definitions by Holmberg (1977), Moore(1977), Peters (1973) and a French Government Law included five integrated elements:

- the separation of teacher and learner;
- the influence of an educational organisation;
- the use of technical media;
- the provision for two-way communication;
- the possibility of occasional meetings;

to which he added two additional 'socio-cultural factors, participation in an industrialised form of education; and the privatisation of institutional learning.

In comparison Open Learning may be taken to cover an educational philosophy as well as a technique. Hence a UK Government Employment Department (1993) definition of open or flexible learning as any form of learning which comprises elements of flexibility which make it:

- more accessible to learners than courses traditionally provided in centres of education and training.

This flexibility arises variously from:

- the content of the course
- the way in which it is structured,

the place of provision,
the mode,
the medium or
timing of its delivery,
the pace at which the learner proceeds,
the forms of special support available,
and the types of assessment offered.

More succinctly open learning describes a “very wide variety of learning arrangements which emphasise

- (a) the removal of barriers to participation
- (b) the giving of greater responsibility to learners not only to determine where and when they study, but also, for example, what they learn, how they learn, and how they are assessed

It involves a positive commitment to the widening of access to education and to the promotion of learner autonomy.” (Scriven, 1991)

Trends in technology

A simple definition of distance learning as organised programmes of study where the student is separated in time and/or place from the teacher shows up both the range of potential topics and some of the more recent trends.

The table below does not include franchising, and conventional off-site and local extension studies / extra mural programmes. However, in some countries programmes in which such off campus programmes are the dominant mode of study are described as distance learning.

Table 1
Separation of study by proximity of teacher and learner in time and space.

		Time	
		Synchronous	Asynchronous
Place	Close	Face to Face e.g. lecturers etc.	Resource based learning e.g. Open learning packs
	Distant	Remote classroom e.g. Video conferencing Tele-medicine	Open AND Distance Learning e.g. correspondence courses “OU supported open learning” Computer conferencing Apple classroom of tomorrow

One of the potentially significant developments has been the increased interest in the use of technology in education. Much of this attraction centres around the use of computers and data networks to provide information and learning opportunities.

A simple history of distance education would delineate two strands: First, the correspondence tradition and secondly the synchronous mode. The latter is exemplified by the decades of experience of institutions such as Stanford where initially postgraduate engineering lectures were relayed to industrial sites using cable, satellite and microwave links. Both in the United States and in Europe the interest in this "remote classroom" type activities has increased recently. Indeed in the USA distance education is still seen by many as a method for scaling up the reach of the lecturer. In both regions the acceptability of video / satellite technologies has of late had a mixed reception. However, the use of network technologies has provided a new lease of life which has often been coupled with a involvement by a different set of personnel within institutions.

In the UK, various Joint Information and Systems Committee (JISC) and funding council initiatives (particularly in Scotland) have been exploring the potential of the use of the Joint Academic Network (JANET and SUPERJANET) and its Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs) for video conferencing, and several multi-campus institutions have invested in video conference facilities. The potential for extending these opportunities are considerable. Already some Universities are linked into local cable networks and within a short time schools and libraries and probably many homes will be equipped to participate in such opportunities. As yet the opportunities for real time collaborative and interactive working offered by the use of desk-top video conferencing and shareware software seem to have been used primarily by researchers and staff in Universities, although there have been some experiments (cf. OU virtual summer school)

For students who are off campus, the synchronous set of technologies offer increased access and for the institutions the potentially some economies of scale. However, it is probably the asynchronous technologies which offer the greater potential for educational effectiveness and student flexibility.

Already communications technologies like computer conferencing , FAX, electronic mail, provide new opportunities to bring students together irrespective of their location and to provide new learning environments. Increasingly electronic libraries, multi-media and international information networks are as accessible by students at home or at work as they are by students on a campus.

In the Open University it is normal to consider three criteria before a new learning technology is deployed in earnest:

Is it cost effective (on the scale and in the circumstances envisaged)?

Is it readily accessible by students (and tutors / teachers)?

and is it pedagogically effective (superior) to face-to -face?

Many of the recent technological developments have yet to demonstrate that they satisfy all (and in some cases any) of these criteria. Whilst it is certainly possible that some opportunities which do pass these criteria, at least for the Open University, will be consumer services and products rather than computers and dedicated networks.

Furthermore it is the Open University experience that in the main new learning technologies rarely usurp old ones. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. As new technologies become available they usually add to the armoury from which one can select for a particularly learning strategy in a specific environment. Stemming from this observation a slogan for those anxious to maintain the full benefits of the learning technologies might be "Multiple media rather than Multimedia". However maintaining such an approach will undoubtedly present economic challenges for Universities both in terms of investment and cost effectiveness.

Trends in Organisational Flexibility

Internationally there has been an expansion in the number of dedicated distance learning institutions or Open Universities. In Europe most EU countries have or are establishing a state funded Open University offering a wide range of curriculum topics. Internationally at least ten countries have mega universities i.e. Open Universities with more than 100k active students studying with them at any one time

However if one ignores the central and regional China Television Universities then outside of the UK this development is still dwarfed in student number terms by the distance education programmes of other universities. This is not a new phenomenon. As long ago as the end of the nineteenth century university departments of correspondence teaching were established at Chicago, and another shortly after in Queensland, Australia.

There has been a steady increase in the number of dual mode institutions i.e. those which provide both distance and conventional programmes. Although there has been some expansion in the UK, it is still modest when compared with many other countries. In the main the growth here has been at a departmental level most notably in professional areas and business and management.

Some countries have also seen the emergence of mixed mode institutions; ones where not only are the methods and materials of distance learning used for on-campus students, but students have the flexibility of selecting a manner of study within a modular programme.

Such changes have been most noticeable in regions where the divide between full time and part-time study is less enshrined in public funding mechanisms and regulation than the UK. In the UK the examples are primarily in areas like MBA programmes where the economics are largely independent of public funding.

Public funding has considerable potential to promote or discourage such innovation. Reputedly developments in Canada have slowed and in some cases reversed with the capping of overall student numbers and in the UK it is difficult to see how the HEFCE proposals to weight distance education at a lower level than other forms will encourage diversity.

Conclusions

The background to ODL in the UK is very similar to that of continuing education. The Open University is for example entirely devoted to adult education and hence lifelong learning. The flexibility of time and place and the tradition of meeting the educational needs of dispersed, isolated and disadvantaged students are similar.

What is more the ability to distinguish between either continuing education or distance education on the one hand and "conventional" education on the other is increasingly difficult as the technologies change, the number of "full-time" mature students increases, and the cycle of lifelong learning means that students studying the same topic in the same mode may be at quite different stages in their own development.

What may distinguish both ODL and continuing education from some other innovations in higher education is the emphasis on effective student learning especially that grounded in their experience.

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