

# *Access and Success: Distance Learning at Massey University and its Impact on New Zealand Society*

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I was delighted to receive and accept the invitation from Sir John Daniel on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning to speak at the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning about distance learning at Massey University and its contribution to the development of New Zealand. We are celebrating fifty years of distance education at Massey this year.

I am always pleased to talk about my University which began in 1964, although its antecedents stretch back 125 years. The essential details are – 34,000 students, three campuses, distance education, Colleges of Science, Business, Humanities, Social Science, Education and Creative Arts. Key pillars of our work are creativity, sustainability, innovation, and connectedness. Massey has a presence in twenty nations and has the ability to provide higher education anywhere.

Because I am in India soon after the Commonwealth Games, I should note that we have an outstanding School of Sport and Exercise as demonstrated by 37 of our students being part of the 125 sportspeople who made up the New Zealand team in Delhi.

I am a strong supporter of the Commonwealth. In my view, it is a grouping of nations that is uniquely placed to make a difference to global problems that can only be resolved through cooperation and collaboration.

I am a strong supporter of learning – a word I use advisedly. Too often we talk about the schooling or education system when we should be focusing on the learner and learning. Importantly for our discussion today talk of learners focuses us on the function of institutions like universities rather than their form.

## The Challenge

The challenge this conference places before us is to ensure access to quality higher education for all. I have been involved with education in one way or another all of my life and have been inspired by the words of Clarence Beeby a Director-General of Education in New Zealand in the 1940s.

Beeby is quoted as saying our “...objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever (their) level of academic ability, whether (they) be rich or poor, whether (they) live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which (they) are best fitted, and to the fullest extent of (their) powers. So far is this from being a pious platitude that the full acceptance of this principle will involve the reorientation of the education system”.

I am sure we all share Beeby’s ambition too but wonder just how we realise it. What is the “reorientation” that is required to achieve our ambition?

Beeby set out his vision for education in the 1940s when the challenge he articulated was difficult enough. It is even more difficult today because we live on the edge of the knowledge society where the majority of people will need to access quality higher education. Without access they will have fewer life chances and our societies will be less rich in every way.

If the majority are to access higher education then we must anticipate that a diversity of educational needs will have to be met throughout the lifetime of learners. Providing people with access to the kind of education to which they are best fitted and to the extent of their powers will require an equally diverse educational system.

In a knowledge society, it is essential people can access higher education because knowledge is the key resource. Without it not much is going to happen.

Confronted by this obvious need we turn to the already existing education system where we find a model of learning that has changed, in most cases, little in centuries.

It still consists of campuses full of learned staff, giving lectures, taking tutorials, setting readings from books and periodicals stored in libraries. Once reserved for a small elite, our universities have rapidly expanded and will continue to do so as demand grows.

On a world scale, the projections for growth in higher education are in the tens of millions in the years ahead.

One by one, accelerated by the current economic crisis, even wealthy nations are beginning to wonder if they can afford to pay for the numbers of people wanting access to higher education, never- mind maintain the quality that makes it worthwhile. Costs have risen for students and we are seeing substantial reductions in Government support for education in countries that once prided themselves on their publicly supported systems. The huge cuts recently announced by the British Government are likely to be a signpost to the future.

In other words, at a time when the pressure to extend access to quality education is growing, we are discovering the cost may be too high.

For some, the answer lies with on-line learning. Opportunities for students to learn on-line are growing but this has not been with the approval of all. Many educational authorities argue that real learning can only take place in a classroom through interaction between teachers and students. Many governments simply will not accept a qualification gained through on-line learning. Others are lukewarm in their support.

So as the number of students grows the challenges grow.

Perhaps, and this will be the focus of my later comments, there is a way forward which we can discern from a close study of what is meant by the knowledge society.

The knowledge society raises questions not only about the importance of gaining knowledge; it also raises questions about the nature of knowledge and how it is best acquired.

A traditional understanding of knowledge saw it as a “thing” to be transferred from the expert to the student by means of instruction. This explains why higher education has taken the form it has over many centuries.

The knowledge society, however, suggests we need to revise our thinking. Knowledge is to be understood not as a thing but as a process which is constantly changing as new ideas are generated, put into practice and overtaken by new ideas.

In the knowledge society knowing about something is not enough; we have to know how to use what we know.

This shift has driven changes in the way we think about learning. The old model I outlined earlier seems inadequate to the task of gaining what is needed to thrive in the knowledge society environment. We need to know how to create knowledge and apply it in useful ways.

New ways of learning have been developing that involve working in teams, collaborating to solve real life problems, bringing together interdisciplinary teams, encouraging learning to connect with the wider community, ensuring a full understanding of how a body of knowledge works.

You can see, I hope, where I am going. The knowledge society is negating the value of traditional models of higher learning and opening up new models that are different. Perhaps these models do not need to take the form we have become used to. Perhaps there are different ways of learning.

There is another factor here – technology. It has long been held that technology will transform the learning process. But these hopes have, to date, not been realised. While many innovations have been applied to learning over the past half century, they have modified but not fundamentally changed the way we organise learning.

This may, and I stress may, be about to change. The new technologies we are making use of today offer the possibility of reshaping learning. What is making this possible is that they are being inserted into the new models of learning I have just been outlining. They are making the more collaborative/connected model of learning possible – indeed they are enriching it with new possibilities.

I am not alone in arguing that we might be experiencing the development of a new approach that may finally change the way we have learned for centuries.

Indeed, it seems there is growing acceptance that change is inevitable and that universities unwilling to change their way of operating risk being irrelevant. If they do not meet the needs of learners in the knowledge society then learners will simply go around them.

## Massey University

I want now to turn my attention to Massey University, distance education and New Zealand society.

As you will see, our experience over a fifty year period resonates with much that I have been saying about the challenges we face if we are to ensure access to quality learning to all people.

Our story starts in the early part of the last century when New Zealand was concerned to provide higher education for teachers wanting to increase their qualifications. Lecturers were found to be supplying these students, referred to as “exempted”, with study materials and allowing them to work from home. This was a source of embarrassment when it was discovered that these students performed as well in their exams as the students who attended classes.

While this practice was tolerated in the early part of the century, by the 1950s, the numbers of people wanting access to higher education forced universities to consider how they might better provide for what was called “extramural” study. Clarence Beeby, someone I mentioned earlier today, was instrumental in encouraging extramural opportunities to enable students to study while managing work, family and community involvement. This was, in part, what he meant by reorientation of the system.

The push to expand opportunities was vigorously resisted by academics who were very dubious about anyone learning off campus. They regarded face to face contact between the lecturer and the student as the only way to provide a quality education.

By the late 1950s the standoff was overcome with the establishment of a new college specialising in extramural teaching alongside what was then Massey Agricultural College in the city of Palmerston North.

Extramural teaching began in 1960 with a small but highly committed group of staff offering first year courses to an equally small group of students. Between 1960 and 1964, Massey Agricultural College morphed into the Massey University College and then into Massey University absorbing the extramural function along the way.

This did not mean the end of debate. Indeed in many ways the debate intensified.

As is often the case, the way forward was driven by the work of a particular individual. In this case I am referring to someone well known to Sir John Daniel and perhaps many in the audience – Professor Don Bewley.

Professor Bewley is credited with a “feat of diplomacy” that secured the importance (he tactfully allowed “pre-eminence”) of internal modes of learning while noting the growing importance of distance learning.

The result was the emergence of what became known as the Massey model of learning. The model had the following features:

- it was dual mode with the same staff teaching both internal and extramural students with equal commitment;
- lecturers were in charge of the papers they taught extramurally and while they were subject to the usual quality assurance measures, they were expected to enhance this quality through their professionalism;
- much of the learning was community based involving staff travelling to meet students and students forming study groups;
- block courses were held on campus to provide extramural students a similar experience to internal students;
- a range of support services were available to reduce the physical gap between staff and students.

While the debate about the relative merits of internal and extramural learning continued, the dual mode convinced most critics that the two styles of learning could coexist.

By the mid-1980s, extramural education was accepted not only by Massey staff but the wider community as an essential part of the higher education system in New Zealand.

Enrolments continued to grow and with them the problem of managing large numbers of learners. Administration grew alongside production services for materials and teaching support services. The capacity to administer examinations anywhere in the country and indeed the world developed and materials for study and examinations were dispatched to wherever they were required. Regional services developed to support communities of learning and the library evolved to cope with the requests of students working in diverse and different situations.

Of course technology played a significant role in the effort to provide learning opportunities to the growing number of distance students.

When extramural began, the technology available amounted to cyclostyled notes, later a Gestetner and a stapler. Establishing a dedicated University printer represented a huge step forward and this facility has over the years become increasingly sophisticated with each technological advance. Today the printer is almost entirely digital and can print almost anything.

Telephones and teleconferencing have played their part in the Massey model, although never widely used. More recently skype and today Adobe Connect Meeting have allowed groups of learners to interact with one another. The ability to conference in real-time from multiple sites is proving popular.

For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, the University invested considerable funding in television. A Television Production Centre was established and many programmes were made for distribution to students. The major television channels experimented with educational programming but never achieved the audience size needed to continue operation. Today the main use of television is as an educational resource and students have available to them, on demand, almost every television channel in the world.

At this point it is worth noting that while technologies were constantly being enlisted to the cause of education, they were seldom as effective as anticipated. Even when they were widely used, they did not

change the teaching and learning process in any fundamental way – they merely added to the mix of options available.

Text-based, self-paced learning suited most learners and that is what they, and their teachers, always came back to.

eLearning, which began to make itself felt towards the end of the 1980s suggested that finally something was about the change. The change, however, could only occur slowly because not all learners had access to a computer. But the use of email proved popular as did the distribution of study materials via computer disk. Learners began to see computers as important to their study and they grew in number.

Teachers began to experiment with digital media and on-line teaching. New and exciting teaching materials began to emerge. And, as always, as the use of computers grew, the support systems had to be increased. Towards the end of the 1990s, the University selected WebCT as its learning management system.

While eLearning was increasingly taken as the way forward, the University discovered it was expensive. Debate ensued over the appropriate way to fund eLearning and the many support services required. But there was no stopping the use of technologies that teachers and learners alike regarded as essential.

Let me pause again in my story. I want to consider the impact of what by the turn of the century was forty years of extramural/distance learning.

I would argue that for teachers and the process of teaching it has done nothing but good. University teachers are on the whole authorities in the discipline but untrained in the process of teaching. The demands of teaching at a distance require staff to think very carefully about the course of study they are offering and the best way to ensure students are able to achieve. I would argue that a half-century of teaching has made Massey staff the best teachers within the New Zealand system.

Let me talk about the students. Extramural/distance study has had a transformational impact on New Zealand society. Over a fifty year period some 250,000 people have gained a Massey qualification studying at a distance. They have done this while managing employment, family and involvement in the community. Being able to include study in their lives has allowed for continuity of social life while lifting the capacity of the nation.

Typically these students have been:

- Employed;
- Second chance (now third chance);
- Mature;
- Geographically dispersed although they are more likely to come from urban areas;
- Two out of three are women;
- In more recent years they take on a greater workload: and
- More Maori and Pasifika people are studying;
- More students are choosing to study both internally and extramurally.

The important point to reinforce is that this profile of students tells us they would not have been able to access education without distance learning.

But let me take you even closer to these students by providing some examples of access and success.

Karen Inglis a Medical Psychology (Hons) graduate from 2005.

Rob Torrance who left the Fire Service for a career in Human Resources after gaining a Diploma in Business Studies.

Winnie Tairea a single mother, studied Human Resource Management before re-entering the workforce in the public sector.

Shane Ellison whose Bachelor of Business Studies was the bridge to a career in transport.

Storm Uru studying Masters in Management, already completed his Postgraduate Diploma in Business. Represented NZ in rowing, most recently winning bronze in the men's lightweight double scull at World Rowing Championships. He is a Sport and Recreation NZ lifestyle ambassador, and chooses to attend events with a Māori focus as a role model.

Fifty years of successful teaching and student achievement has provided Massey with an enormous amount of experience in distance learning.

Today, as a result of this experience we are able to teach qualifications like Food Technology in Singapore using a mix of on-line and face to face classroom teaching.

We have recently secured a contract with the World Bank to teach medical doctors and veterinarians bioprotection and biosecurity using a mix of on-line learning and block courses.

I mentioned at the outset that this year we are celebrating fifty years of distance learning which we believe to have been a major contribution to education and the nation.

## What's Next?

So where to next?

To answer this question we need to return to the knowledge society and the demand it creates for more collaborative/connected styles of learning.

Over the years Massey had begun to respond to this demand and today there are many examples of very progressive learning within the University. But we have decided we need to move more systematically to a new model that we and others refer to as blended learning.

By this we mean that we want to offer our students the best of collaborative face to face learning and a rich digital environment that will also support collaborative learning.

We are making these changes in two ways.

The first is that we have embarked on a major academic reform programme aimed at focusing our teaching programme on our strengths while encouraging our staff to adopt more relevant teaching practices. This requires a very significant amount of change impacting on what we teach, how we teach and how we assess.

The second is that we are introducing new technologies that enrich the ability of students to interact and collaborate on an anywhere anytime basis.

Our first step was to adopt the Moodle Learning Management System – which we have broadened and named Stream.

And we are exploring the usefulness of other technologies that will advance our aims such as:

- Open Educational Resources
- Open Educational Practices
- Personal learning environments
- Mobile learning
- E books
- Cloud

I will not go through the individual technologies because there are many and they do tend to come and go. The point I do want to make, however, is that we are insisting that our uptake of technology is driven by our model of teaching and learning. I say this because it is very easy to be attracted by an individual change when we have to keep in mind that we are building an education system. We have to change the curriculum, teaching practices, assessment, organisation of the institution, external support systems, physical plant and relationships with the community. Single explosive ideas about how to improve what we do are fine – but they eventually have to be embedded in a system.

In a sense we are returning to where we began – equivalence. Massey distance learning began with an attempt to ensure internal and distance students had an equivalent experience. The Massey Model of distance learning was built on the dual mode – demanding high quality while allowing for different approaches to teaching. Blended learning aims to ensure that whether a student is on a campus or studying somewhere around the world they will have an equivalent experience albeit a very different one to their predecessors some fifty years ago.

It is often said that if someone from the 19<sup>th</sup> century walked into a classroom today they would soon feel very much at home. This is unlikely to be true in the future.

But there is more. Beyond blended learning lies the personalisation of learning; the tailoring of learning to the needs of learners. When a core curriculum will be complemented with opportunities for learners to move in many directions; assessment for learning (as opposed to of learning); collaborative learning styles; community involvement; learning organisations that are student centred; support systems that allow for difference, flexibility and diversity.

When we can do this we will have achieved the ambition Beeby articulated in the 1940s – to provide learners with opportunities for which they are best fitted and allow them to reach their potential.

But let's not get carried away. We have reached for the transformation of learning before and been disappointed. We need to advance carefully always keeping in front of us a clear understanding of sound pedagogy. It is learning that should concern us. But today we are less concerned to work within a particular form. It is the function of learning that concerns us and the need to ensure access and success for all of our citizens. That is progress.

I wish you well in your endeavours – there is no more important task than that of ensuring all people have access to high quality learning.

## Reading

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