

UNIVERSITY LEARNING AND LEARNING UNIVERSITIES: COLLABORATION OR COMPETITION?

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Abstract

The paper addresses several issues which impact on distance learning at university level including the tension between collaboration and competition. The focus on access, bears a direct relation to a number of concerns such as the ability of distance learning to provide for flexibility of study, for addressing the needs of persons in areas of low population density, and for transcending geographical boundaries. A comment on financial implications is also offered. A brief look is then taken at practice and staff development. In addition, a number of other concerns are highlighted for future consideration.

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University learning and learning universities: collaboration or competition

My task is to provide an overview of developments, trends and issues which relate to distance learning in the university sector in the Commonwealth - a task which is not easily accomplished in the time frame available; nor does it lend itself to broad generalisations, given the disparate structures, experiences and provisions which exist in this sector. I propose to draw on my knowledge of the Caribbean, and my own institution, The University of the West Indies, and use this as an example. But I will try to focus on several concerns which I hope will provide common ground for further debate.

The context of distance learning in UWI

The University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Enterprise began as an attempt to broaden the base of university offerings. It was aimed particularly at students in the smaller territories and taking advantage of the aggregation of smaller demands to provide cost-effective tuition. This has worked and so the demands have multiplied.

There are now (20) sites in (14) countries with multiple sites in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago.

Nevertheless UWI cannot meet all the demands for higher education and a number of US and UK institutions are beginning to find their niche's - many use distance teaching techniques, this raises the possibility that education in the West Indies could be dominated by those with more resources and that our local systems could therefore be weakened. Collaboration between institutions is of course what everyone aspires to but there is inevitably a tension between collaboration and competition when we are operating in a market environment.

A plethora of models

We now have within the Commonwealth, a plethora of models for higher education which are expected to respond to the "challenges of change presented by the emerging and exploding 'information age', the impact of growing technology, sociological changes in the work that people do and the education they receive, and demographic changes in the student population." (Greer 105) These models come in different forms, including dual-mode, multi-mode, single mode, and even more definitively when speaking of an institutional type, corporate, open, virtual and mega- or various combinations thereof. The early 'correspondence' model is still with us, continuing to form a major component of the offerings of numerous pan-Commonwealth institutions of higher learning.

Within these models there are a range of different technologies employed, from the use of sophisticated Internet and satellite-based video transmissions (generally in the more affluent countries) to the more modest audio and print media which are considerably more affordable for the less well endowed universities.

The vital importance of a mission and of political support

But, even as we take note of the smorgasbord of models and the different technologies, we recognise the need for a clear mission and definitive policies to underpin the new teaching and delivery techniques - policies which address those conceptual and operational frameworks needed to achieve the desired change. Without a clear mission it is

impossible to provide the leadership on institution needs and carry its people to deliver the new models and to manage the pace of change.

Referring to open universities in particular, the President of the Commonwealth of Learning has made a comment that is applicable to all educational developments:

Open universities need very strong political backing. To obtain and sustain (such backing) open universities must have a clear view of their mission and this has to be explicitly communicated to the public at large. Such mission objectives can include any number of statements from cost effectiveness to democratising education, but it is important that the institution's mission reflect the aspirations of the communities in which it functions. (Dhanarajan 1996:3)

It is essential for the success of any open university for planning activities to address the underlying philosophical issues and articulate quite clearly, the policy positions agreed upon.

In my experience mission statements are all too often absent, or do not take into account the key issues which need to be addressed in planning for distance learning.

A question of access

One of these key issues is access. Access can have different meanings when it is applied to affluent countries and to poorer, developing nations.

Flexibility and convenience

Among the more affluent partners in particular (although not confined solely to this category of universities) access addresses the use of distance learning as a more flexible and more convenient study mode, facilitating mature learners who want to pursue university certification without having to leave their homes or work sites. The popularity of having access to such flexible arrangements is documented extensively, but to give a few examples there is Murdoch University (Australia), the University of Waterloo (Canada), the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong, and of course, the Open University in the UK.

Woven into this is the design of special programmes for the workplace, whether geared to the upgrading of employees' skills, or providing training in new areas of need. This has proved popular with business enterprises wishing to facilitate for their own purposes professional development for members of their work force without necessarily having to grant leave of absence for extended periods of time. Distance programmes will also reflect a region's particular orientation; hence, the University of the West Indies' agribusiness, education, business management and health care offerings are a direct response to the Caribbean's focus on business and social development.

Some open universities offer non-academic courses. For example, the University of the South Pacific's university centres actively encourage enrolment in cultural activities (creative writing, music, dance, arts and crafts) which reflect interests of a distinctive local character. Not-for-credit personal development programmes such as are offered at the Open University of the UK represent another dimension of this issue.

Geography

Another definition of access relates to the process of spanning vast geographical boundaries which define a region. The University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific represent well-known examples of distance education within the setting of an archipelago, where the islands often have a limited population which could not support a university or even a campus; and where, in any event, the financial burden of face-to-face teaching across the region would be untenable. Other geographical considerations - land this time, not water - have also influenced the growing number of Australian universities which offer distance learning, and the same holds for other parts of the world such as Canada (for example, Athabasca, Memorial and Mount St. Vincent).

Yet another concern with respect to access is the desire to meet in tangible ways, the growing demand for university education in regions where the enrolment is markedly low. The English-speaking Caribbean represents a good example of such an area, there being less than 8% of the relevant cohort engaged in any form of higher education. While it would be unrealistic to make comparisons with developed countries such as the United Kingdom (48%) or New Zealand (58%) nonetheless the fifteen governments of the region served by the University of the West Indies, particularly those of the twelve non-campus territories, "have been demanding," in the words of Harvey and Williams (1996:5) "greater equity in the contribution the University has been making to their social

and economic development.” Distance education has been recognised as the major vehicle for enabling the UWI to meet this charge, and, particularly since 1996, has undergone major restructuring to enable it to do so successfully.

Cost effectiveness

The last issue highlighted here is that of cost. There is the widely held view that distance learning is more economical than on-campus, face-to-face instruction. The Commonwealth of Learning makes frequent reference to the cost-effective nature of distance programming, as do several of the Australian and Canadian universities which speak to catering for significantly greater numbers at significantly less cost. But this is not necessarily the situation universally, and the rather complex budgeting for distance at the UWI is a case that the operation does not come cheap, even if one projects beyond the first few years of the restructured entity. UWI has also recognised that the cost of distance learning rises if one factors in the significantly larger number of drop-outs from its distance programmes, when compared to on-campus offerings.

Perraton (1993) while recognising that distance education can be cost-effective, at the same time speaks to the other side of the coin, highlighting as he does the demand for resources implicit in any effective distance programme. In answer to the question, “Is distance education a cheap alternative?” he says: The answer is likely to depend on the number of students enrolled, the sophistication of the media used, the amount of face-to-face support provided, and the range of course offered to students. And the answer may depend on a decision about whose costs are to be included in the equation. (Perraton 1993:382)

Can expertise and good practice be shared?

This is, admittedly, a sensitive area, and presupposes that there is, indeed, goodwill and enthusiasm between potential partners. And this may not necessarily be so, for some individuals are at times suspicious of one another, while others are concerned about the probability of “turf erosion” which might be occasioned if an external agency is allowed in.

There is resistance to efforts to encourage institutions to abandon the development of their own distance courses and to adopt those produced elsewhere, even by those who acknowledge Guiton’s argument that ‘there is much duplication of effort in course development, and an assumption that this must inevitably result in reduced quality learning’. There are legitimate concerns about the appropriateness of the material to be transferred, particularly when the movement is from north to south. When the adaptation is also accompanied by the need for technology which is not readily available at the home institution or country, and where there is a call for a significant outlay of funds, the problem, more often than not, becomes more acute.

The example of my own university, UWI, serves to illustrate another side to the problem, admittedly from a perspective which might not be held by others. Distance education providers are in abundance in the Caribbean (often under the guise of off-shore universities) and they all too frequently try to make use of UWI’s distance technology (limited though it may be) not to mention the institution’s staff, in the delivery of their programmes. They do not generally express an interest in sharing expertise, good practice, let alone resources, and, as a result, are not well received by UWI. There are, however, a few universities, particularly in more recent times, which have indicated their desire for bi-lateral collaboration, and this is appreciated, for it provides the vehicle by which meaningful partnerships, including shared learning experiences, can be managed.

But beyond that, although the UWI is ‘owned’ by the region, supported as it is by fifteen different countries, our experience has been that our individual governments tend to look to external providers to solve their needs, even where the home university has the requisite expertise. This may lead to lead to ‘ruffled feathers’, and if the visiting institution is not sensitive to the situation the problem may become exacerbated.

Yet, there are numerous examples of highly successful partnerships, and COL is evidence of this. The warm endorsement of COL’s submissions at both the Commonwealth Education Ministers’ meeting in Botswana in 1997, as well as the meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government shortly afterward makes the case, and provides evidence that COL is indeed fulfilling its mandate

“...to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, be promoting co-operation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education.” (Source: Memorandum of Understanding, Commonwealth of Learning)

Is staff development given the priority it deserves?

Robinson (1999:2-3) claims that:

“Staff development used to be a poor relation in open and distance education, often under-valued, usually under-funded and regularly given low priority”.

There are a number of issues to unpack when discussing this question.

The issue of resources is particularly significant, especially for universities in developing countries, since, all too often, there is reluctance to allocate already scarce funds to areas such as this which have limited visibility. But, beyond that, where the initiative calls for engaging ‘regular’ academic staff in the delivery of distance offerings, there are other concerns to be addressed. There is, for one, the view that distance learning is ‘second class’, that it is not something that ‘real academics’ do. And even where this opinion is modified, staff are quick to express reservations that distance education is an ‘add on’, that their activities in this area are not counted for assessment and promotion purposes. These are some of the concerns which we face at UWI, although, admittedly, there has been a softening of attitudes in more recent times (particularly with the assurance that contributions to teaching at a distance will be assessed, and counted, in a similar manner to face-to-face teaching activities).

One should note that the training of distance educators is regarded by the Commonwealth of Learning as a ‘Model for Success’. While somewhat outside the strict confines of staff development, the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme offered by COL in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (IGNOU) provides a workable method of giving students access to the requisite training in their home countries throughout the Commonwealth.

I conclude this section by making reference to the session on staff development which formed part of the Pan-Commonwealth *Virtual Conference*. Three topics for discussion were posed at the outset which I will re-state here so they will not be overlooked in the workshop.

- What are our current concerns about staff development?
- What lessons can we learn from our experience in staff development so far?
- Future directions: Where should we be heading?

I recently read for the second time, Professor Dhanarajan’s article on “*Setting up Open Universities*” which was presented at a British Council Seminar in 1996. On that occasion he made the point that:

“Increasingly, academic institutions are being forced to respond to the changing nature of the work place, population structures, diminishing resources, learner expectations and increasing demands of efficiencies by their communities and governments. One of the ways in which these demands (are) being met is through the use of alternative delivery methods.” (Dhanarajan 1966:7)

In speaking of open universities specifically, he also made mention of a number of issues which relate to the concerns raised in this paper. These include expanding the capacity for education in new areas; providing efficient and speedy training for targeted groups; offering a ‘second chance’ to those who may have missed out on earlier opportunities; balancing inequalities between age, gender and social groups in terms of educational access; extending education beyond barriers of space and time; and developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education. I hope we will continue to debate these concerns in the workshop to follow.

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