

## Distance Education Leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Distance higher education has only relatively recently been established in some Latin American and Caribbean countries, as part of wider higher education reforms. It has steadily boosted enrollment since the 1970s but despite its growth and significance, the overall contribution and coverage of distance education are still marginal. However, the existence of distance education systems contributes to the increased complexity of higher level education in this region, allowing greater diversity in the use of technologies.

Distance education is a method for increasing access to higher education but it was initially characterised in Latin America by simple and predominantly low-quality education systems and learning resources, offering very limited institutional care for students. To policymakers, in general, distance education was regarded as a second-class education for citizens excluded from traditional higher education systems. However, over recent decades, distance education has undergone significant transformation, with the addition of virtual processes as well as greater innovation, standardisation, complexity, and differentiating processes within university systems. At a regional level, these new realities have resulted in increased public policy focus and the gradual growth of distance education as a more important sub-sector.

Distance education in Latin America and the Caribbean struggles against traditional instructional paradigms and strongly consolidated views regarding its low quality. It also faces many challenges that include scarce resources, limited teacher capacities and low social recognition. The absence of a comprehensive quality assurance system focused on learning outcomes has resulted in perceptions of its low quality. It is a sector with low cultural capital and less political weight.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the virtualization of educational processes and increased regulation, distance education started to improve its quality standards while expanding its coverage. In 2008, all distance education, especially blended learning programmes, accounted for only 1.3% of total education coverage, with about 164,000 students. Increasingly, there has been a process of blending distance education with traditional methods to create mixed models, especially since 2010, as more countries have started to offer online programmes. Several countries have started to allow completely online courses, and institutions have begun focusing increasingly on distance higher education. Consequently, dynamic multi-models have been created in which blended online offerings are presented to differing extents, along with traditional classroom courses.



Growth in the provision of distance education has been evident in not only the private sector, but also the public sector. Its popularity has increased due to an increase in low-income family resources, professional job market demands, private sector participation in distance programmes, and due to a decrease in the costs of communication and digital information infrastructure. Although it remains a sector controlled and limited by strong laws and regulations that engender lower levels of coverage in some countries such as Peru and Uruguay, distance education in larger countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Ecuador have expanded to attain coverage of between 10% and 20%. This was the result of the sheer prevalence of the private sector, and an increased offering of technical and graduate programmes.

Initially, unimodal blended learning models were established in Latin America and the Caribbean, with the mandatory requirement for some classroom attendance, especially for assessment (Mena, 2008). However, with digitisation, online courses have become widespread. Current legislation on distance education in Latin America, shows little difference between the different models.

This has led to the creation of multi-modal university offerings in distance education because of the availability of 100% online courses, as well as a break with traditional rigidity, which is leading to the emergence of new forms of assessment and accreditation. They transcend the traditional document review procedures, inputs, and processes with numerical indicators relating to the assessment of students' learning outcomes.

Latin America is formed of 20 countries and 11 territories. (As the latter are not independent, they cannot be considered countries, despite being part of Latin America). The developments of distance education have been the result of sustained efforts of leading thinkers and practitioners in the region. In this article, several leading distance education professionals coming from some of these countries are presented as recognition of their contribution to the development of distance education in the region.

## **ARGENTINA**

### **Marta Mena**

Professor Marta Mena has had a long career in distance education in Latin America. She started working in this modality in the National University of Luján in the 70s. She was president of the Argentine Association of Distance Education (AAED) when she also served at the National Council for Scientific Research and Technique (CONICET) on the curricular project of distance learning for science teachers. She directed the Teacher Training and Support Program (PROCAD) of the City of Buenos Aires. She served at the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) from 1984 to 2006 as a consultant, prosecutor, undersecretary, and finally pedagogical secretary. In these positions, she created Distance Learning Programmes for the four undergraduate courses in the Faculty and in the Continuing Teacher Training Programme. This last programme became a career for virtual teachers in the Faculty and was adopted by different universities in Argentina. Between 2006 and 2012, she was a consultant to the World Bank, and led Electronic Training (PROCAE) for the virtual training of Public Officials of Argentina and neighboring countries. Since 2012, she has

managed the Virtual Training Programme for Researchers (PROFORVIN) at the Secretariat of Science, Technology and Post-Graduation from the National Technological University (UTN) in Spain and throughout Latin America.

### **Beatriz Fainholc**

Professor Beatriz Fainholc obtained a doctorate in Education (Interactivity in distance education) from the National University of La Plata, Argentina and undertook post-doctoral studies in Virtual Pedagogy from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA. She held a Fellowship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Canada (twice) to study, investigate, and report on open and distance education universities. She is a founding Member of the Argentine Association of Distance Education and an Academic Member of the Mexican Academy of Distance Education. She is a professor and researcher in Argentine and foreign universities in both undergraduate and graduate courses in Educational Technology, and ICT in distance education within the fields of science, society, and digital culture.

## **BRAZIL**

### **Fredric Litto**

Professor Fredric Litto has been Founding-President of the Brazilian Association of Distance Education (ABED) since July 1995. He was Professor of Communications of the University of São Paulo from 1971 until 2005, when he retired from full-time activities. He is now Professor Emeritus of that institution, Brazil's leading public research university. In the USA, he worked on radio production (Pacifica Foundation and Indiana University) and began working with computers in 1964, which led to the organisation and publishing of one of the first reference books in the humanities in the USA using a mainframe computer for content organization. Professor Litto has held various post-doctoral research positions. In 2008 and 2011, he co-authored the books *Distance learning-state of the art: Vols 1 & 2* (Litto & Formiga, 2008 & 2011) which received the award for best book in education from the Brazilian Publishers Association; and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (USA) awarded him the "De Kieffer Prize" for "International Educator of the Year". In 2011, his second book, *Learning at a distance* (Litto, 2010) was awarded the prize for best book in informatics and technology by the Brazilian Publisher's Association. In 2013, the Syndicate of Engineers of the State of São Paulo conferred on him title of "Personality of the Year in Technology, Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Education" for his work in the development of engineering and technology in Brazil. In 2014, the OpenCourseWare Consortium (MIT) selected him to be recipient of its "Prize for Lifetime Achievements," "in recognition of his efforts to expand access to learning". Professor Litto's contribution to strengthening distance education in the region has been substantial.

## **CHILE**

### **Daniel Farkas**

Daniel Farkas is a public administrator of the University of Chile and did post-graduate studies in Spain. He has been director of several organisations including the department of social services linked to the Ministry General Secretariat of the Government of Chile and the

National Training Service of the Ministry of Labor and Social Planning of Chile. He is the author of several publications on eLearning and has received distinguished recognition for his outstanding career related to innovation and the development of training and qualifications through ICTs. He is a recognised authority in distance education and eLearning and is currently president of the corporation of private universities.

## **COSTA RICA**

### **Henry Rodriguez Serrano**

As Dean of the University of San Marcos (USAM), he was a pioneer in offering the first 100% online teaching degree programs in Business Management and Accounting. Although undergraduate distance education programs and some graduate programs provided via a virtual modality had already been offered for several years, the USAM was the first to enter the higher education sector using this new learning modality. Professor Rodriguez has also contributed to distance education in Costa Rica by generating debates in the media about the advantages of this form of study. The construction of online programs has been a cornerstone of the University of San Marcos, allowing it to focus on improving content quality indicators and learning objectives, as this institution is a national pioneer and leads in training “virtual” professors, so that they can understand their new role in university education

## **ECUADOR**

### **Mary Elizabeth Morocho Quezada**

Professor Mary Elizabeth Morocho, from the Technical University of Loja-UTPL, is the Vice-Director of the Latin America and Caribbean Institute for Quality in Distance Higher Education (CALED). This institution has contributed to developing and improving higher distance and online education by designing guidelines and tools for the evaluation, accreditation, and certification of distance and online undergraduate programs, as well as providing accessible online training. She has provided expert quality training at Distance Superior Education (ESAD) and the development of global-level cooperation projects. She currently works as coordinator of the Focal Point of Quality for Latin America and the Caribbean regions with a two-year mandate (2016–2018), having been appointed by the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). This allows her to develop strategies to improve the quality of distance education in Latin America, along with six other regions: Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. Her contributions to distance learning have therefore been considerable.

## **MEXICO**

### **Judith Zubieta García**

As Secretary of Educational Innovation (2004–2009) in the “Coordination of Open and Distance Education” (CUAED) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Judith Garcia has contributed to implementing formal distance education programs and also participated in the design and establishment of the regulatory framework governing Distance Education at UNAM. As Director of CUAED between 2012 and 2015, she focused on training and updating professors, expanding the institution’s graduate programs, and improving the

quality of these programs. From a broader perspective, she contributed to UNAM's reflection on and discussion of new pedagogical models; the use of technology in teaching and learning processes; the design and development of open educational resources, and the establishment of methodologies and evaluation criteria. As President of the Common Space for Distance Higher Education (ECOESAD, 2012–2014), she placed special emphasis on offering continuing education courses and made a major contribution to a project, led by the Federal Secretariat of Higher Education, to define the legal framework for a National System of Distance Education and its evaluation schemes.

### **Fernando Gamboa**

Professor Gamboa obtained a Master's and a Ph.D. degree in Computer Science from Paris-Sud University, France. Since 1999, he has been working at the Apollo Science and Technological Development Center of UNAM, where he coordinates the project entitled "El Aula del Futuro" (The Class of the Future). He has held several positions, including: Coordinator of the Spaces and Interactive Systems Group for Education of The Centre for Applied Science and Technology (CCADET) from 1999 to 2012; Scientific Director of Virtual Educa, a multilateral initiative administered by the Organisation of American States (OAS) from 2005 to 2016; and Secretary of Educational Innovation in the Coordination of the Open University and Distance Education of UNAM from 2009 to 2014. In this last position, he contributed to the increase of UNAM's student enrollments in open and distance modalities from 15,000 to 28,000 students. Teacher training programs for students were also redesigned. He also participated in meetings and negotiations that allowed UNAM to be the first university in Latin America to offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Spanish, in partnership with Coursera. His contributions to distance education and online learning in Mexico have therefore been significant.

### **Ricardo Mercado**

As General Director of the Virtual University of Veracruz from 2003 to 2009, Professor Ricardo Mercado created the first free online courses and degrees at the institution. Subsequently, between 2009 and 2014, he worked as Academic Director of the Clavijero Consortium Institute, a public higher education institution that is fully online. In 2007, he was invited by the National Council of Science and Technology to participate in a focus group responsible for formulating evaluation criteria for graduate distance programs. Recently, he has worked as consultant for the Inter-Institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEE in institutions) in the revision of the Self-Evaluation Guide for Higher Education Programs. He participated in the formulation of policies that guided all distance education in his country. His latest publications address the following topics: online collaborative learning, mass online courses, and the influence of ICT on access and quality of education in Mexico in response to the Incheon Declaration (World Education Forum, 2015). His publications are essential reading for all those who wish to start their work in distance education.

## **PERU**

### **Henry A. Chero Valdivieso**

Dr. Henry is a post-graduate professor and director of international cooperation at the Catholic University of Los Angeles in Chimbote. He graduated in Mathematics Education from the National University of Trujillo - UNT, gained a master's degree in education with specialization in research, curriculum and university teaching and a PhD in Education Administration. His greatest influence in the area of distance education is the fact that he is the creator and promoter of the Latin American and Caribbean Teacher Network ([www.reddolac.org](http://www.reddolac.org) - RedDOLAC). This network contributes to the training of thousands of teachers who are essential to the future development of the region.

## **PUERTO RICO**

### **Juan Tito Melendez Alicea**

Juan Melendez Alicea is a Professor in the Department of Art, Technology, and Innovation at the School of Education, Río Piedras Campus, and a member of the Institutional Council of Distance Education in the university system of Puerto Rico.

He started working with technology in education in 1975, and with distance education in 1985, in a project with the University of the Virgin Islands. Since 1990, he has been conducting research and publishing studies on distance education and has presented his work in many countries. He obtained a degree in political economics and then continued his graduate studies in information science in Albany, New York. He received his doctorate in education from the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico and undertook advanced studies at the University of Cambridge, England. His online work has influenced and guided many teachers in their distance education careers. He is a respected authority in Latin America for themes related to distance education.

## **URUGUAY**

### **Cristina Contera**

In 2006, as Coordinator of the Academic Unit of the Pro-Rectorate of Education of the University of the Republic of Uruguay (UdelaR), Professor Contera started investigating the educational use of ICT in education with a small interdisciplinary team.

She participated in the development of a project submitted to the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and obtained funding to implement a Virtual Platform (EVA) at UdelaR. Today, this initiative includes more than 200,000 users (professors, students, and researchers) and has enabled the implementation of powerful virtual environments. Currently working at the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), she has implemented a Virtual Observatory for Higher Education composed of a pool of experts from all public and private higher education institutions in the country. It is the first time that a space with these characteristics has been created, and its potential for future development is very powerful. This group contributed significantly to defining regulatory frameworks for distance and online education that did not previously exist.

## **Irama F. Garcia**

Irama Garcia is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Dentistry of the Central University of Venezuela, and has worked with distance education and elearning for many years. She was the head of the course Introduction to the Study of Dentistry and coordinator of distance education at the dental school. She was president of the Venezuelan Association for Distance Education for two terms, from 2006 to 2008 and from 2008 to 2010. She was also vice-president of the same association from 2010 to 2012. She has been honoured by various awards for her work in the area of education and distance education. By holding these positions in the most important national associations of distance education, she has become a noted authority for all who work with distance education in the country.

## **Brief Concluding Remarks**

The rapid spread of the Internet, development of computer systems, and digital convergence, along with the flexibility of authorization requirements for distance programs, are all leading to greater democratization of education in most Latin American and Caribbean countries. Distance education has the potential to be one of the most important future levers in the growth of higher education, due to its lower costs, quality, wider access, ability to individualize learning, and scalability. These are still the first steps in an ongoing process that will require more research, innovation, investment, and resource training. Policies that do not limit education to rigid protocols and standards will also be required. Future developments in distance and online learning in Latin America will also need the strong leadership that has been illustrated in this article.

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