

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN: SURVIVAL OF THE FIT-TEST

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Introduction

In order to increase access to higher education, respond to changing global factors and facilitate the pursuit of its mission to unlock the potential of the peoples of the region, the University of the West Indies (UWI, for short) decided to become a *dual* mode institution in 1992. By implication, students are now able to access courses/programmes on- or off-campus, and, therefore, the delivery of programmes at a distance becomes an integral part of the university. However, the manner in which distance education seems to have been conceived at the university under consideration poses formidable problems for implementation. Though most of these perceived problems are not insurmountable, they do hamper the developmental process. Consequently, at every operational stage, ad hocism prevails, as efforts and resources are expended on managing crisis and making quick-fix decisions. A fundamental rethinking, therefore, is imperative for the university to accomplish its cherished goal of meeting the higher educational needs of the region. The prevailing lackadaisical approach to distance education, if continued, will reduce distance education to a mere politico-academic hype in the Caribbean. One way of salvaging the impending disaster is to put proper mechanisms in place for staff development. The paper, however, does not purport to look into the whole gamut of staff development activities for various categories of personnel starting from the top-management to part-time academics and non-academics. Nor does it deal with the levels of, and formats for, staff development, including content, techniques, etc. Nevertheless, the paper suggests a broad framework of reference for orienting the academic staff in developing curricula for distance education. To provide a meaningful context for the discussion, the paper starts with an outline of the emergence of distance education in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

University of the West Indies: Structure and Status

During the post-World War II period, students of the Anglophone Caribbean found that their traditional host universities in the United Kingdom and North America could no longer accommodate them, as places were reserved for the demobilized war veterans, who had served in the Allied Forces. The then Colonial Government, as a result, engaged a high-powered team to look into the feasibility of establishing a university in the Caribbean. The University of the West Indies was, thus, founded in 1948 at the Mona valley in Jamaica, as a University College in a special relation with the University of London, U.K. Subsequently, in 1960, a campus at St. Augustine, Trinidad was started, replacing what was formerly known as the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture. Two years later, the University College of the West Indies attained an independent University status, by a Royal Charter. In the following year, the campus at Cave Hill, Barbados was established. As one of the two *regional* universities in the world (the other being the University of the South Pacific), the University of the West Indies now caters to, and is supported by, 15 different countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean: Anguilla, Antigua & Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines and the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago.

In addition to the above mentioned three campuses, the university has centres in all the *non-campus* countries. The courses and examinations for general degrees of the University are common across the campuses. Of the professional faculties, agriculture and engineering are located at the St. Augustine campus, law at Cave Hill and medical sciences at Mona. To provide further higher educational access to, and meet a variety of educational needs of the region, the School of Continuing Studies was established, which was operational since the 50's in the form of Extra-mural studies.

The Vice Chancellor is the Chief Executive Officer of the university, whose office is at Mona, assisted by a Deputy-Vice Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellors. This constitutes the Vice Chancellery, which is part of the University Centre, the other constituent parts of which are the University Administration unit and the Bursary. It should be noted here that the university centres, headed by Resident Tutors, in non-campus countries are part of the School of Continuing Studies, and are absolutely different in terms of function from the University Centre. (It is no gainsaying the fact that for a new comer, some of the existing terminologies in the university, such as centres, units, etc., pose problems).

Each of the three campuses is headed by a Principal, who is at the rank of a Pro-Vice Chancellor, assisted by a Deputy, Campus Registry and Campus Bursary. There are Campus Councils and Boards that guide the campus function. The Senate and the University Audit Committee assist the University Council, which governs the University. (Other Committees, Boards, Councils, etc., have not been mentioned here, as they are of no immediate relevance for the present purpose).

The university has since its inception has registered a steady growth. From a single department (i.e., Medicine) University College, it has grown as a multi-disciplinary regional university. At present, the total number of academic staff is 1232, of which full time members are 964 with 696 males and 268 females, and part time members are 268 with 150 males and 118 females. As regards student enrolment, it has grown from 33 in 1948 to nearly 20000 in 1998. (This number should be viewed against the backdrop of the total population of about 5 million in the English Caribbean). In contrast with most of the higher educational institutions in the world, at the UWI, female students outnumber male students, and interestingly, this phenomenon is common to all the three campuses. For purposes of reference, the higher education populations of some of the countries are given below, along with that of the Caribbean:

| | |
|-----------|------|
| USA | 50%+ |
| UK | 33% |
| Singapore | 16% |
| India | 07% |
| Mauritius | 03% |
| Caribbean | 07% |

Source: Koul (adapted)

There is a strong correlation between the number of people who are engaged in higher education and the economic development of a country. And, if the UWI wants to reach the 50% mark (as in the USA), arguably the infrastructure has to be developed about 7 times. The resources required for this, by any reckoning, will be prohibitive. However, the Caribbean Heads of Governments have agreed that by the year 2005, 15% of the university age cohort (16-24) should be enrolled in tertiary education. This modest projection seeks for a little more than 200% increase from the current student enrolment at the university, though over a span of 6-7 years. Given the present situation in terms of Government funding and available expertise, it is difficult for the university to accommodate even this phased increase in enrolment. However, it cannot shirk its social responsibility of being a regional provider of higher education. One of the alternatives to meet the challenges obviously is to resort to the distance mode of teaching/learning.

Preparing to change

With three campuses and 15 participating countries, the University has a unique structural and therefore operational complexity, a parallel of which is difficult to find elsewhere. The Renwick Report (1992) acknowledges this complexity and observes that it is extremely difficult to understand the university. One main reason for this can be attributed to its regional monopoly status. However, the changes that are being brought in, consequent on the Report of the Chancellor's Commission on Governance (1994/1995), should be able to resolve some of these operational complexities. The Commission's recommendations, for instance, include decentralization of university operations,

revision of financial codes, downsizing of the Vice-Chancellery, creation of new offices in the University Centre, reduction (as a result of merger) in the number of teaching departments and faculties, provision for distance education, etc.

However, this being a transitional period, the university operations tend to look more complex than ever, as some established structures defy changes. For example, cross-campus functional problems notwithstanding, the university remains and is rededicated as a regional university. More than an academic entity, the university has been and is seen as a political entity. Multi-government funding pattern adds credence to this factor. In other words, apparently it is for political reasons rather than academic ones that the university continues to adorn a regional colour. From an outsider's point of view, which may not have completely absorbed the Caribbean psyche, the paper insists that the *structural regionalization* of the university should be reviewed, and where necessary and possible, properly amended.

Admittedly, however, distance education, as envisaged in the Commission Report and in the Strategic Plan 1997-2002, is poised to make the university regional, and even global, in terms of academic operations. This need not necessarily be true only of the University of the West Indies. In an increasingly changing world, a single institution, be it single mode or dual mode, cannot disseminate the volume of new knowledge generated virtually every day. Of necessity, therefore, institutions have to come together and, in partnership, provide courses/ programmes jointly. Operations of this kind add value to education. But what is of utmost importance in this pattern of operation is that institutions have to have courses/ programmes which are of comparable standard. In the main, quality issues need to be paid serious attention, lest most of the distance teaching institutions will shortly 'go out of business' or at least lose its present 'charm'. Fortunately, competition among the distance education providers has made the late 20th century learners conscious for quality and cost-effectiveness. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to make changes in the distance education operations, more particularly in the curriculum development processes, in the university under reference.

Distance Education at the UWI: Prospects

In 1978, the university started a *Challenge* examination programme, akin to private study, i.e., students sit for examinations just armed with the university syllabus. Put differently, *challenge* students pursue their studies with no additional support from the university beyond a copy of the syllabus and, where necessary, a list of recommended reading. On occasions, however, university centres in the non-campus countries did provide local teaching support, and the faculty members from the campuses toured across the region for this purpose. A trace of this type of programme is still in existence.

Subsequently, in the early 80's, the US Government proffered a satellite to the UWI for academic purposes. This package of offer came with engineering capability and other prerequisites for programme delivery. The university accepted the challenge and used the satellite for some programmes. Consequent on this "Project Satellite", now defunct called ATS6, and armed with the U.S.AID fund for a feasibility study, the university explored the possibility for launching programmes through satellite uplink and downlink facilities. This exploration ultimately took shape as the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE, for short). This Experiment (Enterprise, since 1992) instituted in 1982, among other things, intended to provide a two-way teleconferencing facility to *challenge* students.

Keeping in line with its status and to meet the educational needs of the region, the UWI with right earnest started offering courses through the system of teleconferencing as early as 1983. The instructional system included some written materials, extensive audioconferencing and local face-to-face support, where required. Brandon (1996) observes that

- the UWIDITE support to *challenge* programmes made it indistinguishable from its own operations,

- this generated greater university control of all aspects of the teaching and learning involved in *challenge*,
- this necessitated the inevitable increase and development of teleconferencing sites.

Funds for the expansion of the teleconferencing sites came from the Lome III & IV projects, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB). By the time, the CBD loan is over in December, 1998, it is estimated that there will be 27 teleconferencing sites in 16 countries. In fact, the CDB loan was pledged on the premise that the university would shift to dual mode.

In 1992, the University Academic Council endorsed the general thrust of the Renwick Report, which *inter alia* advises that the university should, from the start, embark on a broadly based range of programmes of study falling into one or other of four main categories: certificate, undergraduate, graduate, and diploma. Besides, it is suggested that the university should focus on leadership programmes that draw on research writings and experience distinctive of the UWI and the Caribbean; on preliminary courses (for students undertaking sixth form) and on non-credit programmes of continuing education and professional updating.

As a further development, the University Council accepted and endorsed the Governance Report in 1994. Thus, as mentioned, after nearly five decades of its existence, the university embarked in 1996 a new system of governance, bringing in a number of institutional, procedural and operational changes that seek to substantially alter the character and thrust of this regional institution, while still enjoying a monopoly status. Of significance is the establishment of the Board for Non-Campus Countries & Distance Education (BNCC & DE). Simultaneously, the Distance Education Centre was established by upgrading the UWIDITE system, which is *paradoxically* seen as a culmination of the process of transforming the university from a single mode operation to a dual mode one. Now, the University's projections for the year 2000 envisage one in 8 of its registered students being enrolled in distance education.

Distance Education Centre

The DEC is one of the three executive arms of the BNCC & DE, the other two being the School of Continuing Studies (formerly, Extra-mural Studies) and Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (formerly, Office of University Services) each headed by a Director. The DEC, headquartered at the Cave Hill campus, has its presence in the other two Campuses, and at the non-campus university centres. The intent and purpose of DEC is expressed in its Mission Statement that:

The Distance Education Centre of the University of the West Indies is dedicated to becoming a centre of excellence in itself and a catalyst for excellence in distance education throughout the University of the West Indies; to developing and delivering quality programmes by distance and, in so doing, meeting the higher education learning needs of an ever widening population of students, in order to contribute to UWI's mission of unlocking the potential of the peoples of the region. Driven by the commitment to promote increased access to university education, and recognizing the particular and special needs of the distance education student, the DEC assumes the lead role in ensuring that UWI's distance programmes are responsive, learner centred, and cost-effective.

The university has thus joined the world community of distance educators, whose tribe increases tremendously in every passing year, as evident from the table given here:

| 1992 | | 1997 |
|--------|--------------|--------|
| 70 | Countries | 120 |
| 374 | Institutions | 800 |
| 15,588 | Courses | 35,000 |

Source: Koul

In functional terms, the DEC assists the Faculties to prepare and deliver distance education courses/programmes. For this purpose, it has in each campus a small team of professionals comprising a Curriculum Development Specialist, an Editor, a Production Assistant, a Graphic Artist and a Student Advisor. Secretarial support is given by the administrative staff.

Policy formulation as regards distance education rests with the BNCC & DE. With the University Council's approval of Statute 21(c), that governs the Board, distance education became an integral part of the university's regular activity. That is to say, distance education is as much part of one's duties as the traditionally supposed ones. Since the 1992 UAC decision, each Faculty has had a Deputy Dean for Outreach and Distance Education, who serves as a link between the Faculty and the DEC. In the new dispensation, while the aim is to make course preparation a shared, cross-campus activity as far as possible, the onus of

coordination for each course and/or a programme rests with individual campuses. The courses are developed and/or adapted by the faculty members as part of their workload, with the distance education expertise drawn from the DEC. Faculty regulations governing programmes are such that students can earn credits for a particular course/programme from any campus and also can transfer them to any other campus. Further, in principle, they have the option of transferring the credits earned in an on-campus course/programme to distance education and vice versa. However, it should be admitted that clear policy guidelines have yet to be evolved. In consonance with the dual mode concept, the status of distance students at the UWI is that of an on-campus student, as the entry requirements remain same for both the streams of students. The distribution of the UWI distance learners and tutors during the academic year 1997/1998 is given below:

| DE centres | Students | Tutors |
|------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Antigua | 57 | 08 |
| Bahamas | 18 | 07 |
| Barbados | 120 | 08 |
| Belize | 31 | 10 |
| British Virgin Islands | 23 | 06 |
| Dominica | 124 | 10 |
| Grenada | 56 | 08 |
| Jamaica | 578 | 71 |
| St. Kitts & Nevis | 56 | 11 |
| St. Lucia | 226 | 10 |
| St. Vincent | 192 | 12 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 239 | 16 |
| Total | 1758 | 187 |

At present, the instructional system comprises print materials with some audioconferencing and face-to-face tutorial inputs. Assignments do not form part of the instructional scheme, and therefore, distance teaching/learning through tutor/student feedback and through continuous assessment of student performance is conspicuously absent. Though, currently, print is the main instructional medium, of late, the DEC is toying with the idea of launching some web-based courses. However,

this may not come into existence in the immediate future, given the academic lethargy that prevails in the university and as a corollary the mindset (or is it the other way round?). The examination procedures in the UWI distance education are parallel to those at the face-to-face situation.

The following programmes are currently on offer at the Distance Education Centre, University of the West Indies:

- M.Sc. Agriculture and Rural Development,
- B.Sc. Programmes in Social Sciences, Agribusiness Management and Management Studies.
- Certificate programmes in Business Administration, Public Administration, Adult Education, Education for the teaching of the hearing impaired; mathematics; literacy studies and social studies.
- Foundation course in English for academic purposes
- Preliminary courses in Physics and Biology

Though it may appear quite premature to make an observation on the growth of distance education in the new dispensation, as it is barely 3 years old, it is important to note that the university fails to learn from its past experience in distance education, though in its earlier version. Instead, quite embarrassingly, the past experience has set in complacency which threatens to retard the growth of distance education in the Caribbean. The situation warrants reengineering processes. This is elaborated in the context of curriculum development, one major operation at the DEC.

Traditionally, distance teaching institutions (right from the time of the UKOU) pay greater attention to course production than student support services. In the present context of the paper, student support is seen as part of the curriculum development process. In other words, materials seem to have been produced with scant attention, if any, paid to student needs. Drawing heavily from this manufacturing industrial legacy, the UWI system of distance education does not seem to be any different. Given its past experience in different forms of distance education, it is difficult to understand whether the university's insensitivity to student needs demonstrates its ignorance or its negligent attitude to student needs, born out of the monopoly status. Either of which needs to be corrected, if the university has to compete with the ever changing global market and provide the much needed socio-economic fillip to the region.

What is suggested here is that curriculum development processes have to keep the students at the centre of operation, instead of the customary practice, i.e., disciplines. The then Vice Chancellor, Sir McIntyre, rightly observes that "we no longer have a monopoly on tertiary education...we now have to compete vigorously for students.... unless we can meet all their conditions, they may have to take the alternative...." (During a Symposium in 1997).

Curriculum Development: Focus Shift

Curriculum development has been and remains an area of significance in the context of distance education, as materials have to effectively compensate for the relative absence of real-time contact between teachers and students. In terms of operation, curriculum development is usually guided by either of the following two principles:

- whole is a sum of parts
- whole is more than a sum of parts

Obviously, these are not tangible entities but then their manifestations can be seen in the way one executes the process of curriculum development. Put differently, though the principles are tacit, they quite overtly influence the processes and policies respectively at the micro and macro levels. In the university under discussion, the first of the two operative principles listed above seems to be followed. This implies that materials are first produced on the basis of a general syllabus that is being used in the face-to-face contexts. Put differently, materials are being produced, irrespective of the individual needs of distance learners. This generalistic approach to curriculum development goes contrary to the fundamental philosophy of distance education: that learner is the pivot of operation. What worth are

the materials, if they do not satisfy the needs of the learners? It is possible that the materials may have been prepared by eminent academics in the field and have a design to suit distance education. But then, conformation to a particular design need not necessarily be effective. This warrants an attitudinal change, a change that keeps the learners and quality first. Staff development programmes should accordingly be initiated. When changing the attitudes becomes the centre of the staff development programmes, the outcome will be the choice for the second of the two operative principles listed above, which replicates the current management philosophy of “total quality” and reengineering. That is to say, no piecemeal reformative attempt would help lay emphasis on learner needs in the context of curriculum development. A total shift in attitudes however would. Obviously, given the deep-rooted beliefs, as also unchecked misconceptions, this is quite a formidable task.

Beginning with the scientific management movement of the early 20th century, industrial management, based on the notion of systems approach, has increasingly emphasized elimination of waste and promotion of efficiency. Distance education, more often than not, draws heavily from this approach, which analyses a system in terms of its components, each of which contributes positively or negatively to the total system performance, in the way, for example, assembly lines work in the context of manufacturing industrial paradigm. To extend this analogy, precious time is overspent in the cyclical process of overhauling each and every part in the production chain, only to discover at the end of the day that some parts have either become obsolete or have developed snags. The process, therefore, has to be started afresh all over again. In essence, because of some weak links in the chain, the DEC curriculum development process, subsuming production and delivery, suffers and the resultant cascading effect that leaves the stakeholders skeptic jeopardizes the very purpose of distance education.

Reengineering, therefore, demands a fundamental change in perspective, moving away from a “positivistic established order” to an “interpretative natural order”. For example, reengineering espouses:

- Focus on whole jobs: Tasks and responsibilities previously split among several persons should be rationalized for purposes of single-window operation.
- Remove bureaucracy: Bureaucracy often far outweighs the risk of passing the decision to a front-line or client-interfacing workforce.
- Empower the workforce: Personnel closest to the place of action should be empowered to exercise judgement to significantly speed up responsiveness.
- Keep stakeholders first: Client-need driven process (natural order) should be given more significance than historical precedence (established order).
- Customize operations: Individualization rather than standardization should guide the operations.

Keeping in line with the reengineering principles, the paper envisages a change in the UWI system as regards curriculum development: a movement from the established practice of discipline dictated curriculum to a learner determined curriculum. If it is desirable in the context of face-to-face educational set up, it is of paramount importance in distance education, since in the latter teaching/learning takes place in a non-contiguous situation. In the context of the UWI, for example, it is enshrined in the policy document Strategic Plan 1997-2002 that [in the context of classroom education set up] “lecturing staff will be required to increase the number of contact hours they spend with their students; additional services will be made available to counsel students on their study programme...” (pp. 36 and 37). This is further explicated through the concept of ‘throughput rate’ (p.172) and reiterated that there needs to be an increase in the ‘contact hours’ with “an average of 15 hours of contact time per week...” (p. 45). Where does this leave the distance learners, the UWI being a dual mode institution? Looking into the operation of curriculum development from the holistic perspective, therefore, is imperative.

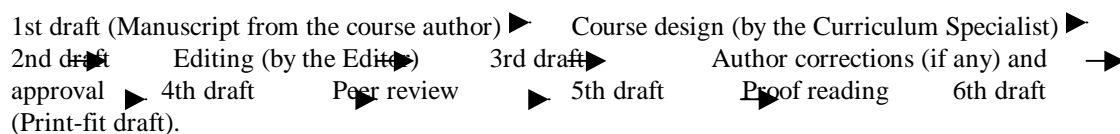
The policy document referred to here asserts categorically that “distance education will be significantly enlarged and will use both the print and electronic media to provide instruction; through this device a greatly increased number of students will be enrolled to read for UWI degrees.” (p. 43) Distance education is thus seen as an integral part of the broad strategy “to expand its [the university’s] enrolment over the planning period, taking due account of the imperative to ensure that

the kind of graduates which UWI produces coincides with the market demands. It is accordingly proposed that the total enrolment at the UWI in year 2001/2002 will be approximately 21,000 FTE [full-time equivalent], about 5,000 more than were enrolled in 1995/1996.” (pp. 34 and 35). Clearly, distance education plays a vital role in the University’s scheme of things, as the Strategic Plan further observes in the context of global/regional trends, the challenges posed by other overseas universities both through face-to-face and distance education programmes (pp. 71, 72, 163 and 164).

However, to translate the ideas into operation, and implement them effectively, looking at the policy pertaining to programme production from a different perspective is in order, keeping in view the past or/and on-going experience. The Plan states that the “academic content of the distance education programme will be firmly in the hands of the Faculties so that there will be no dilution of the high academic standards which UWI has established...” (p. 213) This statement in fact is a reinforcement of an earlier emphasis that “the academic content of the programmes being delivered through distance education will be under the firm control of the Faculties so that there will be no deviation from the high academic standards which are the hallmark of the UWI degrees...” (p. 44).

There is no two opinion as regards scrupulously maintaining the academic standards and continuously striving to improve it, where possible and necessary. Emerging as a dual mode regional institution, it is only fair that the Faculties have a rightful say on the content and academic standards of the programmes on offer or being planned at a distance. But the policy statements referred to above do mean more than this in terms of operation. It should be recognized that academic quality is not something that resides in a product or a service, it is what one creates. If this is agreed upon, the university should consider that the Faculties have been trained, at varying levels, for a particular mode of teaching: teaching by word of mouth in face-to-face situations. In essence, their contribution in terms of materials greatly depends on their personal attributes, skills and inclination to distance education, besides their respective expertise. Further, more often than not, the materials to be worked on for purposes of self-learning in the context of distance education are their classroom lecture notes. There is no harm in using them. However, it should be appreciated that notes/materials used in a lecture have the advantage of being moulded according to class-perception, providing a lot of scope for maneuverability. In the main, this is possible because teaching and learning are ‘produced’ and ‘consumed’ at the same time, unlike in distance education.

Self-learning materials can, to a considerable extent, accommodate what transpires in a classroom. And this is done mainly by building the andragogical content into the materials by a person at the distance education unit in consultation with the Faculty concerned. If it is interpreted in operational terms, all that a Faculty does in essence is to provide a syllabus, i.e., an outline of the content, a content suitable for face-to-face situation. And, this content is suitably formatted, conforming to a house-style, for distance education. The customary course development process currently in practice at the university is as follows:



(However, this process is not always followed). On the face of it, the various stages indicated above seem to be reasonable and effective for course development. It should nevertheless be pointed out that this process is meaningful, only when the content is identified vis a vis learner needs, at the curriculum planning stage itself. In other words, the content should emerge from an analysis of learner needs. That is, distance educational processes at the University of the West Indies should be guided by the service industrial processes, keeping the distance learner at the pivot of operation. The emphasis therefore will fall more on effectiveness rather than on efficiency: fitness for purpose for which the ‘product’, i.e., course materials, in the present context, is created and not on its mere conformance to a design *per se*.

However, before instilling the required attitudinal change in the process of curriculum development, it is imperative on the part of the university management as a whole to change from the hitherto

practised project model of operation. For example, financing of the DEC can fall under either of the following two possibilities:

- **Project funding:** making proposals for additional lease of funding from the CDB or funding from other agencies. The implication is that the DEC will continue to depend on one funding-agency or the other. Further, long term goals cannot be even visualized, (not to talk of realizing those) as projects, by definition, have definite time-frames.
- **University funding:** earmarking certain funds from the university budget as is the case with the other academic organs of the university. The implication is that the DEC can realize long term goals (as also short term ones) to meet the university-commitment to the region. In other words, a *sustainable development* is possible in the DEC operations. This, however, does not exclude projects for varying purposes, but they will remain secondary unlike in the first category mentioned above.

For obvious reasons and for practical purposes, the second of the two possibilities is preferred. This in turn will have its own implications for the DEC operations. In the new dispensation envisaged then it is incumbent on the DEC to bring out more programmes/ courses of varying duration in order to generate revenues that augment the university-budget as also widen student-profile and concomitantly improve support services. For launching demand-driven courses, the DEC may have to collaborate with university Faculties, Tertiary Level Institution Unit and School of Continuing Studies across the region and with appropriate organisations outside the region as well. In the course of time, the DEC should be able to finance some of the university projects, as is evidenced in other bimodal institutions in such countries as India.

In order to generate/commission programmes/courses of the type envisioned, the current curriculum development processes need to be appropriately tuned to accommodate the ensuing challenges. One such challenge is to shift the focus from a discipline centred curriculum development to a learner centred one. This change will help the university to enter into partnerships with other distance education leaders in the world, besides serving the individual needs of the learners.

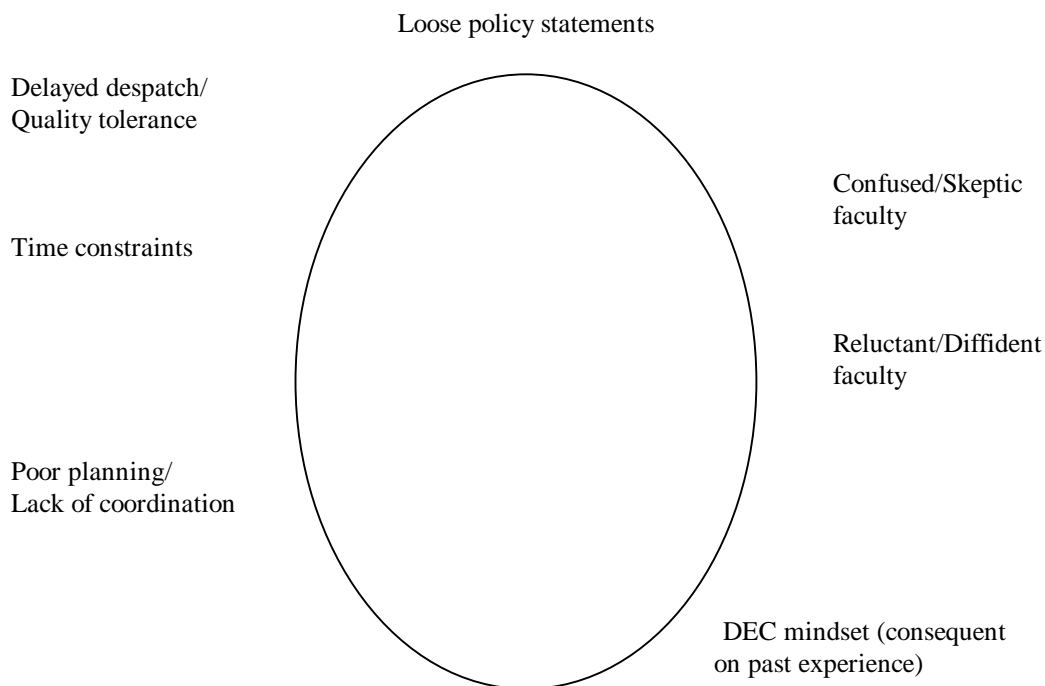
To Chart the Future

All that has been discussed so far assumes meaning, only when a few ground realities are proactively looked into by the university top management. During a symposium (1997), it was expressed that “distance education is not an option...it is a requirement, it is necessary, it is fundamental to our survival in the future....” There is no denial of this fact, but the university has to also keep in view some of the issues raised by the faculty members in the symposium, a sample of which is provided here:

1. “I know we say that teaching should be part of your assessment but I have yet to attend a meeting where anybody has asked if the person has carried out his teaching function properly, whether face-to-face or distance or otherwise”.
2. “...everybody will agree that distance education is the way to go, but we don’t have a structure in which to operate. And when you ask people to undertake distance education exercises they tend to put it off until they have got rid of their regular duties and when they have spare time.”
3. “delivering on the distance education is an add-on. Irrespective of what the policy of the University is, it is an add-on.”
4. “[There is a] “voluntarist” approach [to distance education]. We would have to think purely in terms of the new appointees, the new contracts which build in distance education so that it comes over time and not in this sort of one shot thing.”
5. “... there is a limit to which you can really expect that [distance education work] from the existing faculty. As a result, you see faculty that is not into that mode and way of thinking.”
6. “...people are overworked and overstressed. And yet you have to find the time to put on this additional effort, which also something new to you that you have not done before and you are trying to find your way, and it is very difficult....”
7. “Present approach may not work [that is] University mandate that one should do both.”

8. "...we have people who are good content experts, great doctors, great physicians, but they don't know how to write distance education material."
9. "...unavailability of library books, cost effectiveness needs to be checked (some courses are more expensive than face to face), market research to be conducted and administrative problems need to be solved."
10. "If we educators cannot help to develop the Caribbean region, our children are going to have a hard time living here."
11. "First time distance education instructors also need to be familiar with the needs of an adult learner, as opposed to the more traditional learner that they have been dealing with__ the 18 to 25 year-old...."

The excerpts given above help this paper assert that attitudinal change does not depend solely on the thrust of the staff development programmes. The acceleration process, to a large extent, rests with the top management. If the policy statements, for example, are clear as to what professional development is envisioned for the faculty members involved in distance education activities, most of the skepticism demonstrated right now can easily be won over. To provide a case, delay in despatch of materials or the compromised quality of the materials can easily be traced to loose policy statements as under:



(This is notwithstanding the fact that there still are a minority of committed individuals who on their own change, irrespective of the incentives).

Though, for example, it has been agreed upon that work in distance education will be recognized in the assessment of staff for tenure and promotion, no clear policy has yet been evolved. At present, a general point of contention relates to the activities relating to materials production: whether they be treated on a par with teaching (pedagogy), research article or publication. Until the faculty members are convinced of the recognition given to course production, distance education activities will continue to be viewed as an "add on". Referring to the question of ownership of 'distance education' during the UWIDITE phase, Brandon (1996) remarks that "people were engaged on a consultancy basis in producing materials and teaching on the system. Though voluntary, they were paid extra (little different from undertaking some teaching for another institution on the side)...Producing materials and teaching were not considered for determining work-load or staff-student ratio". Naturally, faculty members showed little enthusiasm to involve in the distance education activities, though the scenario as regards the distance education provision has since changed considerably.

Further, even those who are interested in distance education may be reluctant to come forward mainly because they are diffident to assume the role of a course writer. Whatever may be the theory, it has to be accepted that not all the classroom teachers can communicate effectively through the written word, as their training, if any, pertains to face-to-face situations. The university should be aware of this factor and should put in place appropriate skill development programmes. In other words, the assumption that classroom teachers are effective distance teachers as well is misplaced, to say the least.

Despite its resolve to become a dual mode operation, the university cannot legally enforce it on the faculty members as their appointment contracts are for oral teaching. Can the delay in materials production be attributed to this, among others? In the future, this legal problem can be resolved when the university contracts new staff. Their contracts can clearly indicate the required involvement in the distance education activities. However, this does not solve the present problem and that of those who lack written skills. In distance education contexts, generally, team-work helps solve most of the skill-related problems. But then, the attitude to work in a team, which distance education assiduously fosters, should emerge in the present context, as the existing culture of teaching at the UWI is highly individualistic and private. It is time that the UWI took stock of the current practice of distance education, before it is too late for redemption.

Conclusion

Given the present regional context, the University of the West Indies still assumes a monopoly status in higher education in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Consequent on the University Council's acceptance of the Commission on Governance Report, the university has become bimodal in operation with a view to casting the higher education network wider in the region. However, the practice of distance education, as it has obtained today, in the university (and so the English Caribbean) leaves much to be desired. Evidently, the initial failure to manage change, primarily in terms of staff attitude, seems to have obfuscated the potential of distance education. Though delayed, measures need to be put in place as a priority to thwart any further degeneration. One primary measure is to evolve staff development programmes, addressed to mindsets that focus on learner concerns. Learner concerns thus should occupy the centre of operation, rather than the prevailing practice of skirting around them by giving priority to institutional convenience. In the fast changing world, institutions should of necessity endure the test of fitness for purpose. The UWI is no exception. This should get into the psyche of every single individual in the university—right from the top management to a part-timer, and various other categories of personnel in between—lest distance education remains an empty academic-political statement in the Caribbean.

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