

Distance Education in the 1990s: A Review of a Recent Trend

Ian Mugridge

Growth in distance education

Early in 1987, John Daniel* President of Laurentian University in Ontario, Canada, presented to a Unesco consultation on distance education at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia, a paper surveying world trends in higher distance education. Daniel provided an authoritative view of recent developments in distance education on all continents (Daniel, 1987). This document still provides us with an extremely useful source of information.

Distance education is clearly the most rapidly growing and changing form of education. *It seems certain that this situation will continue as governments recognise that they must provide for the needs of students in greater numbers and in more flexible and inventive ways. The rapidly increasing cost of providing for and taking part in full-time education; the growing need to provide more people with more opportunities to train for new careers or to improve skills for existing ones, the need for governments to deal with pressing national and local problems in both developing and developed countries; the simple requirement, ever more evident, the people need to be given the chance to make the most of themselves; all these and other factors dictate that growth and change will continue.*

* Now Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University.

Collaboration a new trend

In the international sphere, inter-institutional collaboration has often been restricted to the provision of aid, training or consultative services. The work of the *British Open University* (UKOU) is, of course, the outstanding example here of a single institution which has had an extraordinary influence in both English- and non-English-speaking nations throughout the world.

Recently, however, other activities have begun to occur which seem to show that collaboration can be extended across national boundaries. One of the earliest attempts to take institutional course materials and adapt them for use in another country was the *National University Consortium* (NUC) which took UKOU materials and applied them to institutions in the United States. Growing quite quickly into a group of almost thirty institutions, NUC developed a coherent curriculum for American universities and adapted appropriate UKOU materials for use in televised courses. In addition, though with great difficulty, a small number of original courses have also been developed.

With the addition of two Canadian institutions, NUC became the *International University Consortium* (IUC). It has never, however, become more than an organisation catering to small numbers of students in its member institutions, using UKOU materials, which, however, excellent in themselves, often did not fit well with American or Canadian curricula. More recently, IUC has begun to change its focus into a mode of operation which provides for greater collaborative development among members. Thus, on the basis of members' wishes and participation, IUC is now casting its net wider in acting as a broker for members who wish collectively to adopt materials from elsewhere or to develop new courses themselves. With the imminent arrival of the *University of Western Australia* as the first non-North American member, such activity is likely to be considerably expanded.

Another kind of collaboration has been slowly developing, through the work of the Open College of Hong Kong, now renamed as the *English School of Undergraduate Studies* of the East Asia Open Institute. In his Unesco and ICDE papers, Daniel refers to the institution's strategy as 'required reading for anyone interested in international co-operation in distance education (Daniel 1987, 1988b).

When, in the early 1980s the founding principal, Professor D.F. Swift, first introduced this plan for an institution whose programmes were entirely those of

others, which would be 'unashamedly parasitical' in nature (Swift 1986), many people - myself among them - greeted his plan with considerable scepticism. Since then, the college has amply demonstrated the viability of such an approach and the usefulness of using, where possible, imported materials to avoid the massive costs of new developments.

It is interesting to note that, as this article is being written, Swift has been appointed the first director of the new *Hong Kong Open Learning Institute*. This institution, which will enrol its first students in September 1989, promises to be an even more interesting experiment in collaboration: its programmes will be almost entirely imported from overseas, and courses will be undertaken largely in concert with the five existing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong.

A similar experiment, though administered in very different ways, is being undertaken in *Malaysia*, a country which has long suffered from an under-supply of university places, both in conventional and distance modes. During the last two years, a private organisation, *Disted Services*, has attempted to repair this deficiency by acting as an agent for a number of provider institutions from outside the country. 'Disted' provides local support services - registration, record-keeping, instruction, facilities - to Malaysian students while the provider institutions, primarily from Australia and Canada, offer agreed supervision, course materials and accreditation. Students may either complete credentials at home or use credits earned in Malaysia towards credentials to be completed overseas. Again, this experiment is still in its early stages but seems to be providing a useful and successful service to students as they move through courses from one or more institution. (Dhanajaran & Mugridge 1988). It is likely to provide a model for similar activities in other parts of the world, some of which are already being discussed.

In conclusion

The cases cited above are no more than examples of a growing tendency towards collaboration among agencies involved in distance education, based not on any single model but on pragmatic attempts to solve local or regional problems in the most appropriate ways.

One final example, perhaps the most important of all, must be mentioned. This is the new *Commonwealth of Learning*. Based on the recommendations of a Commonwealth expert group (Briggs 1987), on discussions at the 1987

Commonwealth heads of government meeting and on the report of a working group (Daniel 1988a), this agency was formally initiated in Vancouver, Canada, in November 1988. Its objective is nothing less than the establishment of distance education collaboration - in information gathering and dissemination in training, in development and so on- on a Commonwealth-wide basis. At the time of writing, nothing more can be said than has already been put forward in the papers cited above. But, if it carries out its mission, if it builds on the experience already gained in the Commonwealth and elsewhere, the Commonwealth of Learning could be the catalyst which ensures that the proposition from which the discussion began - that the movement towards collaboration is the most important development in the field of distance education in recent years - becomes a reality.

Note

This is a slightly edited version of Ian Mugridge's "Distance Education in the 1990's : A Review of a Recent Trend." *Educational Innovation and Information*. No. 58, 1989. Also, reference system is the Author's and has not been altered.

References

- Bates, A.W. The potential realities of using satellites for distance education in Western Europe. In: Stewart, D.; Daniel, J. S., eds. *Developing distance education: papers submitted to the fourteenth ICDE World Conference in Oslo, 8-16 August 1988*. Oslo. Permanent Secretariat, ICDE, 1988. (Here after cited as ICDE, Oslo).
- Black, J.P., et al. Portable computers and distance education. ICDE, Oslo.
- Blom, D., et al. The NADE media and technology project: new ways of supporting distance learners in Norway, ICDE, Oslo.
- Briggs, A. *Towards a commonwealth of learning*. London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1987, 83p.
- Castro, A. The educational challenge of optical storage technology. ICDE, Oslo.
- Daniel, J.S. World trends in higher distance education and opportunities for international co-operation: proceedings of the Unesco consultation on distance education, Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, Australia, 1987.

- Daniel, J.S., et al. *The Commonwealth of Learning: insitutional arrangemens for Commonwealth co-operation in distance education*. London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1988.
- Daniel, J.S. Distance education and national development. ICDE, Oslo.
- Dhanarajan, G.; Mugridge, I. The Disted-OLI Project: a case study, [Paper prepared for a World Bank Conference on Distance Education, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, September, 1988].
- Gledhill, V.X.; Dudley, C.P. Electronic tutorial system for distance education. ICDE, Oslo.
- Laaser, W. Some obstacles to implement new information technologies in distace education, ICDE, Oslo.
- Naidu, S. Access to higher education and training in the South Pacific: the role of telecommunications and distance education, ICDE, Oslo.
- Shale, D. Towards a reconceptualisation of distance education. *American journal of distance education*, Vol. II, no. 3, 1988.
- Siaciwena, R.M.C. Distance education and national development: the Zambian case. ICDE, Oslo.
- Swift, D.F. The global village realised (Paper delivered at the OLI/KNOW Conference, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, 1986).
- Villaroel, A: Villaroel, B.L. Higher education and equity: instituting policy awareness, ICDE, Oslo.
- Walker, M. et al. Teaching at a distance and learning in the community. ICDE, Oslo.
- Zhou, Jiانشu. The development of higher distance education in China. ICDE, Oslo.