

2: What resources does it need?

All educational innovations make similar demands: a commitment to risk, the investment of credibility and capital ahead of any likely return, the diversion of staff from the well-trying to the experimental, and political faith in an idea. Within this context a new distance-education programme makes particular demands for resources and support, requiring finance, staff, educational support, and political backing.

Resources of these kinds are necessary no matter what institutional structure is proposed for a programme of distance education, although the way resources are deployed turns on questions of organisation and structure which are considered in chapters 3 and 4. Thus we need to ask much the same questions about resources no matter what institutional structure is being considered. In this discussion, therefore, the term 'distance-teaching institution' is used quite broadly to include, among others, open universities, small specialist units or departments and distance-teaching departments within conventional colleges or universities: its use does not imply that the decision to launch a programme of distance education means that you have to set up a new and quite separate institution.

2.1 What financial support is available?

Distance education has been acclaimed as a way of expanding education without the capital investment needed for new school or college buildings. Such economies exist and, over a period of years, we can expect that distance education may succeed in teaching students at a lower unit cost than is possible through conventional methods. But a new distance-education programme will require some capital investment as well as recurrent funding.

Capital expenditure, or the allocation of capital resources, will be needed in order to provide office buildings and specialist equipment such as printing machinery, broadcasting studios and computer hardware and software, and in due course to provide for their replacement and updating. In some cases it will be possible to use existing facilities at least for some of the functions of a distance-teaching institution, but in others the institution will require its own. Capital will be needed, too, for the writing, editing and physical production of teaching material as it is necessary to invest in course development well in advance of the enrolment of students. Thus certain capital costs have to be incurred well before any students are enrolled.

Effective distance education also requires adequate recurrent expenditure. Once courses have been written and printed it is possible to run a distance-teaching institution at a modest level of activity, using the same courses year in and year out. But courses get out of date: good distance education demands continuing finance so that both materials and methods can be kept up to date and continually developed and improved. Some government colleges

have suffered, and their students have suffered more, because an initial willingness to fund distance education has not been followed by the continuing financial commitment needed to sustain work at the same quality. Equipment has become out of date and neither adequately serviced nor replaced. At least as important, courses have become tired and outdated, less effective and less interesting.

2.2 Can the staff be found?

Distance education needs academic and administrative staff in the same way as conventional education. But the jobs of staff members are different. Academics are called upon to write materials rather than to lecture and to tutor groups of students who are learning from printed materials rather than to teach them in the conventional way. Despite these differences, most distance-teaching institutions have been staffed by people who have come from conventional posts and learned on the job and there are benefits in having a flow of people in both directions between distance and conventional education. Increasingly there are opportunities for professional distance-education staff to follow in-service courses in order to develop their skills and expertise. If, therefore, a new distance-teaching institution can recruit able people with a general background in education and administration, and where necessary persuade its government to release them, it should be possible to staff a programme of distance education.

As the full-time staff of a distance-teaching institution develop so they become specialists of a new kind. Many of them need to be a hybrid between an educator and administrator, combining a variety of expertise in a way for which there is no direct analogue in conventional education. This has implications for the staff and promotion structure of a distance-teaching institution which will differ from that of a conventional university or government department. An open university may be able to work out its own staff structure without too much concern for parallels with conventional universities, although, if it is seeking parity of esteem, it will need to provide parity in terms of service. A distance-teaching department in a bimodal university – one which teaches both conventionally and at a distance – will in contrast need to seek a closer match between conditions for distance-education and conventional teaching or administrative staff.

Many distance-teaching institutions make extensive use of part-time staff as course writers, script-writers and broadcasters, tutors and counsellors for face-to-face sessions, and correspondence course tutors. A distance-teaching institution therefore needs to develop a structure for recruiting and rewarding part-time staff and particularly for training them. As they are unlikely to be familiar with the methods of distance education, training programmes on writing or tutoring, for example, will be necessary. The administration will also need to take

account of the particular interests of part-time staff; as their work is different from that prevailing in conventional education there may be no adequate precedents for the administrative structures needed.

2.3 What communication services are available?

Effective communications are essential for distance education. Students will benefit if we can use a variety of different media to teach and to communicate with them. We need to ask about the best way of distributing teaching materials in the various available media.

Perhaps the first question is about the quality of the post; rapid, two-way, communication between learner and tutor helps and encourages learning. At the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre, in order to investigate the quality of the postal service,

before committing ourselves to offering correspondence courses we carried out a small test ... We sent letters to the headmasters of several schools around the country enclosing a stamped addressed postcard. We asked them simply to post the cards straight back to us. We discovered the postal system worked very well; most letters were delivered in two or three days, although letters to the mountain districts could take up to two weeks.

Mitton 1982, p.8

If the postal system is too slow, there may be alternative ways of distributing teaching materials. The Venezuelan open university (*Universidad Nacional Abierta*) distributes lessons to centres throughout the country for collection by students. In a programme for the upgrading of teachers it may be possible to deliver materials to students and collect work from them using the same machinery as is used to distribute salaries.

In industrialised countries it may be possible to use telephones and computer links to communicate with students. Telephone tutoring has proved useful for students in remote parts of industrialised countries. Increasingly students in these countries have access to microcomputers; distance-teaching institutions have begun to experiment with the use of computer links to support and teach their students. As these methods are not readily available outside the major cities of many developing countries they are not considered further here.

While distance education does not demand broadcasts, they have vital strengths. Broadcasting communicates immediately with none of the delays inseparable from the post and can make a subject come alive for the distant student. It puts distance education into the public eye and makes teaching openly available to all who have ears to hear. While it would be presumptuous to claim broadcasting time for every subject, no matter how specialised, its benefits are so great that it makes sense at least to ask how far it can be available. Where broadcasting is not available, it may instead be possible to make and distribute audiocassettes to students. These can usefully complement printed texts and, like radio,

may have a different psychological effect on students from print. But cassettes have to be distributed physically and so are not, for all purposes, a suitable alternative to broadcasts.

More detailed questions will follow: about radio versus television, about signal strengths and coverage, about available broadcasting hours, about the roles of educators and broadcasters in making programmes, about the teaching role of particular media, and about the relationship between a distance-teaching institution and a broadcasting authority. For the moment it is enough to identify the question, 'Can broadcasts be available?', and to suggest that the answer yes will bring rewards for students while the answer no need not rule out a viable and effective programme.

2.4 How can face-to-face support be provided?

Rare individuals can learn quite alone and enjoy the process. Most of us require some sort of human contact to make our learning come alive, to resolve difficulties with a text, to get encouragement. If learning is to be more than the acquisition of predetermined information, then two-way discussion is of its essence. While there are ways of organising this at a distance, for most practical purposes face-to-face learning is a necessity in many countries. In some cases students may be able to attend a regular evening or weekend session near their home although there are often difficulties here: students may be widely scattered and social constraints may limit their ability to attend. In other cases it may be more convenient for students to attend a short residential session, although this, too, may cost dear in time and money. Students may be able to support each other in self-help study groups.

Whatever the arrangements, they will impose administrative burdens on the distance educator who will often need to borrow staff and premises from another institution in order to make face-to-face study possible. Tutors or group leaders will also need to be briefed and trained, as the skills of supporting students who are receiving most of their teaching at a distance are subtly different from those required in regular classroom teaching.

2.5 What support will a distance-teaching institution have from other schools and colleges and other parts of government?

A new distance-teaching institution is likely to seek help with face-to-face learning from other institutions in the educational system. It is likely to make other requests to them as well: it may need to borrow the skills of specialist teachers while its students may want arrangements for transfer, or accreditation or advanced standing at conventional institutions. At the planning stage, therefore, it will be necessary to ask questions about the relationships between a distance-teaching institution and other educational bodies. This has bearings on its constitutional structure (see 4.2-4.4 below).

A distance-teaching institution may also need help from other branches of government. It may want to

use a central transport organisation to distribute teaching materials and is likely to want access to broadcasting facilities. If it is teaching subjects like agriculture or health it may need professional advice from those ministries in developing its own materials. Two consequences follow: it will need political backing, discussed in the next section, and a constitutional structure which gives the necessary framework for consultation with other agencies.

2.6 What political support will it have?

Behind the last five questions lies a more general one about political support. A distance-teaching institution makes different demands from those of an ordinary school or college on the education service, on its host university or on government. Its establishment may be controversial or suspect. Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister under whom the British Open University was established, had this to say in his introduction to the memoirs of its first Vice-Chancellor Walter Perry:

The original proposals met an almost unanimously hostile press – Sir Walter quotes the judgments of *The Times* and others, words which read strangely today. I seem to remember one warm welcome in *The Economist*. Opposition in the education world, from the established universities to adult education and local authorities, was hardly less robust. . . . Government departments, notably those of Education and Science and the Treasury, were uniformly critical, with a marked lack of enthusiasm on the part of certain senior ministers.

quoted in Perry 1976, p. xi

The opposition was overcome, in that case, by political backing at the highest level which will not always be available or necessary. Distance education has a legitimacy today which it lacked in the mid-1960s, which can be symbolised by the unanimous parliamentary support in India for the Bill establishing the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 1985. But, within the context of each institution, whether that context is an individual university, or a ministry of education, or a national political system, political backing remains necessary both because distance education is often still an innovation and because of the demand for resources that it is bound to make and that is different from the demands of most schools or colleges.

Summary

While a programme of distance education can be launched without the buildings or capital investment needed for residential education, it does need capital investment for its specialist facilities and adequate funding for the acquisition or development of teaching materials.

Most distance-teaching institutions have been staffed by people with a background of conventional education. Both full- and part-time staff are, however, likely to have different roles in distance education from those in conventional education.

Planning for distance education requires a review of the communication infrastructure and of the arrangements that can be made for face-to-face study. A distance-teaching institution may need to work closely with other parts of government as well as with other educational bodies.

Appropriate political support is necessary in launching a new distance-teaching institution.