

## 3: How does a distance-teaching institution work?

If students are to learn at a distance, they need effective educational and administrative support. This support differs from that needed by full-time students in an ordinary school or college. The planner therefore needs to identify the services to be provided to students and to have some understanding of the nature of these services before taking a decision about organisational structure. The key questions are about the necessary functions of a distance-teaching institution, teaching methods, the production of materials, the work of writers, students and tutors, and the award of credit.

### 3.1 What services need to be provided by a distance-teaching institution?

In eight areas these functions impose particular demands. In order to meet these demands, a distance-teaching institution needs a well-staffed and well-run central administration which can undertake the planning and scheduling of its programmes in such a way as to ensure that teaching and support services are available to students when they want them. While there is no separate heading below for the central administration, its smooth running is a prerequisite for all that follows.

The way the demands are met will vary from place to place and from time to time. Functions may be shared between institutions or concentrated in one. But, in planning for distance education, it is useful to distinguish between them and to ask where responsibility for them will lie.

The first three functions are broadly educational and the last five broadly administrative.

#### 3.1.1 The design of educational programmes including acquiring and developing teaching material

Any distance-teaching institution needs to decide how it will teach its students and go on to ask how its teaching materials are to be developed. Distance education depends on teaching materials which are produced centrally, whether these are printed or broadcast. As the materials take the place of conventional face-to-face teaching, their quality is central to the quality of the education offered. Arrangements for the development of materials, which have a bearing on the administrative structure chosen, are considered further below (paras. 3.2-3.4).

#### 3.1.2 Tutoring and counselling

Tutoring and counselling students at a distance are rather different jobs from teaching students face to face. A distance-teaching institution will need either to undertake this function or, if it is working in cooperation with partner departments or institutions, ensure that one of its partners is doing it effectively. In doing so it will need to take account of decisions about the

way its students should work. Tutors, many of them working part-time, will need to be recruited and trained (see para. 3.5-6).

#### 3.1.3 Award of credit

Some distance-teaching institutions, most notably the open universities, themselves have a status which makes it possible for them to award credit to their successful students while others prepare students for qualifications awarded by other bodies (see para. 3.7).

#### 3.1.4 Production, storage and distribution

Once teaching materials have been designed and developed, they have to be reproduced and distributed. Printed materials or cassettes require physical distribution; broadcast materials require access to air time. Institutions will vary in the way they distribute materials but all will have a responsibility for ensuring that materials reach students when they need them.

#### 3.1.5 Record system

A distance-teaching institution will need to keep records that are probably more systematised than those in a conventional college. Records are needed on students and their progress, on the production, storage and distribution of materials, and on finance. Detailed student records are needed both to control the despatch of teaching materials and for monitoring student progress, while records on materials need to include information both about their educational strengths and weaknesses and about their production and storage.

#### 3.1.6 Financial system

While any organisation needs to keep control of its finances, the finance and costing of distance education is different from that of conventional education. (The implications of this are discussed in chapter 5.) Administrative systems for costing and for allocating resources need to be adapted to distance education as measures like 'contact-hour' do not translate easily into distance education.

#### 3.1.7 Arrangements for recruitment

Many distance-teaching institutions will need to make arrangements for recruiting students, and informing potential students about what they can offer them. In some cases staff responsible for counselling students are also responsible for advising prospective students about courses that may be of interest to them. In others, a separate information service undertakes this work.

#### 3.1.8 Evaluation

The word is used in more than one sense by educators and often refers to the testing of

individual students. Here, however, it refers to the evaluation of distance-education programmes and institutions. All educational processes are likely to benefit from formative evaluation; less familiar or innovatory ones can be expected to benefit all the more.

These functions need not all be undertaken by the same body. An institution might, for example, confine itself to the production of material for teaching at a distance and leave the job of distributing it or tutoring students to other agencies. Or a distance-teaching department within a bimodal university may itself have quite limited functions and leave other functions to other parts of the university. Tutoring and counselling may be controlled from the centre or may be decentralised or subcontracted to other agencies.

Decisions about teaching methods and about the award of credit will affect the choice of administrative structure, and vice-versa.

### **3.2 What teaching methods will it use?**

Evidence from research and practice suggests that there are no intrinsic differences in effectiveness between educational media although there are major differences in their convenience for students or for tutors, their costs, and their attractiveness for any one purpose or to any one learner. Distance education is likely to be more effective if it can combine print, broadcasting or video material, and face-to-face study rather than relying on a single medium. The precise choice of media is likely to be determined by the infrastructure of communications (see para. 2.3 above) and by the comparative costs of different media (para. 5.3 below). Print is indispensable: students need a permanent record of their work and most of their learning will be done from a printed text.

The two qualities that distinguish broadcasting from print – that it conveys speech rather than its symbols and that it is instantaneous – are both important in determining its role. If broadcasting is available it can convey enthusiasm and stimulation, and overcome a student's sense of isolation, in a way which is given only to the rarest writers of prose. The immediacy of broadcasts also make it possible to communicate with students without the danger of postal delays. Audiocassettes, or videocassettes where students have access to videocassette players, can in many cases replace broadcasting but will not, of course, provide this immediacy, or keep the institution in the public eye or ear. They will, on the other hand, allow students to use recordings when they wish without being locked into a broadcasting timetable. (This may be double-edged: there is some evidence that a fixed timetable encourages students to watch or listen rather than to postpone doing so.) Broadcasting and cassettes can, of course, be used together. Universiti Sains Malaysia, for example, uses broadcasts for counselling and for teaching courses with large enrolments and audiocassettes for more specialised courses.

Face-to-face teaching allows both immediate and two-way communication. It can help learners relate their mass-produced learning materials to their own environment and their own interests. Perhaps most important of all, face-to-face dialogue allows the learning to move in directions that were not foreseen at the time the lesson was planned or written. Beyond its general value it has a particular strength for teaching practical subjects or languages where effective learning requires an immediate response from learners.

The varied strengths of different media reinforce the claim that students will benefit where it is possible to combine them. The choice of media for any one course, and the balance between them where several are used together, will be determined by the nature of the subject, the educational background of the learners, and practical issues of cost and convenience. In turn, the extent to which a distance-teaching institution plans to use any particular medium will affect its organisational structure and its relationship with other bodies. If, for example, it is to make regular and heavy use of broadcasts then it may need to employ specialist staff and facilities that would not be justified for merely occasional use.

### **3.3 Who will prepare and produce materials?**

There are four possibilities. First, an institution may appoint its own academic staff who themselves produce most of the teaching materials. This decision implies that the institution will establish academic faculties or departments comparable to those of a conventional university. This has become the most usual structure for open universities. Second, its own staff may commission materials from writers outside the institution; in this case its staff will need the expertise to identify writers, and to edit their work, but will probably not be organised on a faculty basis. The Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, for example, draws its writers from educational establishments throughout the Province and beyond and does not have an academic faculty. Third, where a university teaches both face to face and at a distance, it may expect its academic staff to teach both externally and on the campus. In bimodal institutions of this kind much course material may be written by full-time academic staff, but not by staff who devote most of their time to distance education. Fourth, some institutions acquire materials from others. The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong, for example, works mainly by using course materials which were produced in open or bimodal universities and for which it provides tutorial support. By acquiring materials, or the rights to them, an institution may be able to start work more quickly than if it has to develop everything for itself although it may still be necessary to devote time and resources to adapting such materials.

In practice, any institution is likely to employ writers on several different bases. Even if the institution looks mainly to its own staff for writers it is likely to go outside for some purposes: there may be too little work to keep a particular specialist busy

or the specialism may be so rare that it is impossible to compete with an existing institution for the academic's services.

In all cases it will be necessary to make contractual arrangements with course writers. These arrangements need to ensure that the institution has the necessary assurance of the quality of the materials being written and that it has an adequate measure of control over materials produced in its name. At the same time, contractual arrangements will need to protect the academic reputation of any writer whose name is associated with them. Where a distance-teaching institution's own full-time academic staff are writing materials these matters are likely to be covered by their contract of employment. In bimodal universities, or where outside writers are used, a series of administrative issues arise. Will writers be paid, over and above their salary, when they write courses? Will they be relieved of regular teaching duties while they are writing? Can they be seconded to the staff of the distance-education department? Who will own copyright and what control will writers have over the long-term use of materials with which their names are associated? What choice will a distance-education department in a bimodal institution have in the selection of course writers and what sanctions will it be able to employ if their work arrives late or is unsatisfactory? While it is not, of course, necessary to answer all these questions at the planning stage, it makes sense to keep them in mind in considering alternative approaches to course development and their implications for the choice of administrative model.

### **3.4 How will the writers work?**

While lectures are usually given by a single teacher, distance-teaching materials usually need the co-operation of a group of people. They are likely to need a specialist in instructional design. Where they use more than one medium, they may need specialists in broadcasting production, in editing for educational effectiveness, and in graphic design as well as in the subject being taught. A course stretching across conventional subject boundaries will demand writers from different academic specialisms.

The composition of any teams that produce materials will depend on the organisational structure of the institution. Some large institutions may, for example, have broadcasting producers on their own staff while a smaller or more narrowly based institution is less likely to do so.

In some cases the written element of a course is drafted by a single author, working in co-operation with an editor employed by the distance-teaching institution. More often, courses are developed by larger teams which bring together subject specialists, media producers, and editors or educational technologists with pedagogical skills. In open universities, which can rely on their own academic staff, such teams may work closely together, on a more or less full-time basis over a period of some months. Where writers are from outside the institution, and working part-time, such intensive interaction is

seldom possible although some courses have been developed in short workshops of two to three weeks. This intensive process may save on writing time but increases the demand on the editor who works on the material after the workshop.

Major difficulties can arise in employing part-time course writers. Potential writers often underestimate the time it will take to produce a course and the demands of their regular job, if they have one, normally take precedence over their writing. In any small country the pressures on an academic specialist are likely to be so great, in terms of university work, consultancy, government committee work and the like, that part-time writing becomes a heavy burden. If a writer produces a single course, then there is a comparatively small return to the institution for the time and effort it puts into the training of a course writer. As a result, a number of institutions, and especially those working in the south, advise against employing part-time writers. There are, however, institutions which successfully use part-time writers for much of their work although the majority of these are in the industrialised countries of the north.

No matter how many or how few authors are working on a course, their material will need to be edited. The job of editing goes well beyond copy editing. There are specialist pedagogical skills in presenting teaching material, so that it is effective and useful to students. An editor (or educational technologist or transformer: titles for this person vary from one institution to another) who can bring these skills to bear on authors' texts thus has an indispensable role to play in the production of good teaching material.

### **3.5 How will the students work?**

A distance-teaching institution will need to make decisions about the ways in which its students will work through their courses, and about the support they will receive: these decisions will, in turn, influence both the design of teaching materials and the choice of an administrative structure.

Students in many programmes are likely to work at home. But a distance-teaching institution may decide to make arrangements for them to come together for group study, either for short sessions in an evening or at a weekend, or for a longer period such as a one or two-week summer school. Sessions may be voluntary or compulsory; in subjects with a practical or laboratory component many distance-teaching institutions have made some face-to-face work compulsory in order to match their courses as closely as possible to those of conventional institutions and to ensure that students have adequate hands-on experience.

Decisions will also be needed about pacing. Correspondence colleges in the private sector, which teach for public examinations, have traditionally allowed students to enrol at any time of the year and left them to decide how to pace their work and ensure they are ready for their examinations at the appropriate time. In contrast, many open and bimodal universities require all students to enrol at a fixed time in the year and to work at a predetermined

pace, whether they are working full-time or part-time, on the campus or off it. This facilitates the arrangement of broadcasts and face-to-face courses but at the expense of flexibility for the student.

### **3.6 How will the students be tutored?**

Decisions about the way students should work have a bearing on the employment of tutors and counsellors. Students are likely to need both face-to-face tutors and tutors to mark their written work, most of whom will work part-time, and many of whom may be located away from the institution's headquarters. Tutors may be employed by a distance-teaching institution or the institution may co-operate with other colleges or universities so that the latter take responsibility for providing tutorial support of one kind or another.

In some cases a tutor will also provide general counselling and advice to students. In others the job of counselling is separated from that of tutoring. Many distance-teaching institutions in Australia and Canada, for example, appoint counsellors as well as tutors, encouraging students to take all their general study problems to their counsellor, and to have more frequent contact with their counsellor than their tutor if they feel the need to do so.

The work of tutors and counsellors is likely to be crucial to the success of the programme; good tutoring results in a higher completion and success rate for students. A distance-teaching institution therefore will need to establish a system for the recruitment, selection, briefing, and training of tutors and for overseeing their work. The training will need to take account of the fact that the roles of tutor and counsellor in distance education, where the content of teaching is carried by print or audiovisual materials, are different from those of teachers in conventional education.

### **3.7 Who will award credit?**

This issue turns on the choice of constitutional structure: a fully independent institution may award its own degrees, while other types of institution are likely to prepare students for the examinations of a different body. But there are supplementary questions about the form of awards to be made and the form of examination.

If an institution is to teach for a qualification which it does not itself award, it is necessary to ask whether it can have any influence on the style of examination for its students; an examination designed for internal, full-time students may be less suitable for those working part-time externally. Some universities have taken the view that, to maintain parity of esteem between internal and external degrees, all students must take identical examinations. Other universities, and examining

boards, have set examinations specifically for external or part-time students that are equivalent but not identical to those taken by full-time students.

Where a distance-teaching institution has some influence or control over qualifications it will need to make decisions about methods of assessment and, in particular, about the relative roles of continuous assessment and of formal, end-of-course, examinations. Students' views here are likely to be mixed: some will welcome the opportunity to build up marks through continuous assessment while others will see the link between their tutors' assessment of their work and their final credit award as a threat and as something that can jeopardise good relations with their tutor.

Decisions about the award of credit are likely to be linked with decisions about entry standards where some distance-teaching institutions have allowed open entry in the sense of requiring no prior qualification for entrants while others have matched their entry requirements to those of comparable full-time institutions. In either case there will be pressure to ensure that exit standards match those of comparable institutions; the concern to do this is likely to be particularly strong where an institution allows open entry.

### **Summary**

**A distance-teaching institution needs to address both administrative and educational functions differently from a conventional school or college. In doing so decisions about its teaching methods will be of prime importance in shaping its administrative structure.**

**The choice of teaching methods will be conditioned by the nature of the subject, the educational background of the students, the comparative cost of different media, and their convenience for learners and tutors.**

**Materials may be produced by the regular staff of an institution, by outside writers working on contract, or by staff members of the parent body in a bimodal institution, or they may be acquired from a different institution. They may be written either by teams of authors or by a single author. In all cases they will need editorial work with inputs from an editor who brings pedagogical skills to the job.**

**Decisions about how students should work will affect the design of teaching materials as well as the organisational structure of the institution. Tutoring and counselling are a key to success; much of this work is likely to fall on part-time tutors and counsellors who will need training and support from the central organisation.**

**A distance-education programme will be shaped by decisions about who is to award academic credit for it.**