

Chapter 1: PURPOSE, ACHIEVEMENTS AND METHODS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

1. Twenty years ago we could not have held this meeting. The oldest institutions of which participants had first-hand knowledge (the National Correspondence College in Zambia and the National Extension College in Britain) were only just beginning work. The Open University was an untried and unpopular idea. Experience was limited to a tiny group of institutions outside the mainstream of education. By the time we met, in contrast, the Commonwealth had some 200 government or university distance-teaching institutions. They range from the British Open University, now second in Britain only to London in the number of graduates it produces each year, to specialist colleges with students numbered only in their scores.

Scale, Audience and Function

2. The largest and most rapidly growing distance-teaching institutions are outside the Commonwealth, in China and in South-East Asia. The two open universities in Thailand, for example, now number their students in hundreds of thousands. Distance teaching has proved attractive to governments where a huge demand for higher education has made it impossible to offer conventional university education to all but a small minority of those qualified to enter upon it. The context of our meeting was that distance teaching seems to offer opportunities for countries and universities faced with that dilemma. But along with large universities created in response to such demands, distance teaching was also of value in some highly specialised areas. The Dundee College of Education, for example, was offering a course in educational technology at a distance for only about a hundred students a year. In between these extremes we had the Correspondence Department of the University of Zambia with some 600 students and the Open University of Sri Lanka with some 8000. There remained problems for those concerned with distance education - of quality, of management, of criteria for success, of methodology. But beyond these, and despite the dramatic growth over the last 20 years, there remained problems of credibility. Distance teaching is still often seen as of marginal importance to education and of necessarily poor quality. We agreed The Secretariat should play an active part in informing ministries of education and institutions of higher education about the achievements, capacity and potential of distance education.

3. Distance teaching has been adopted for various audiences and for various reasons. Some countries and institutions have taken it up as a cost-effective way of producing graduates and one which is particularly attractive where the numbers demanding education are pressing against budgetary limits. In some cases it has been conceived primarily as a way of expanding the supply of trained manpower. But arguments about access are also important: distance teaching makes it possible to reach audiences who would otherwise not have access to education. The needs of remote audiences led Australia, Canada and New Zealand early into distance teaching. And demands for access were an important strand in the thinking which led to the British Open University. In Australia, too, the Technical and Further Education Sector (TAFE) has adopted distance education in an attempt to make vocational training available to adults throughout the country and to meet the demands of those who prefer to study at a distance. Distance teaching offers educational

opportunities to those who are disadvantaged by distance from a university or college and has been used in an attempt to overcome other educational disadvantages as well.

4. Although the categories may overlap we can distinguish a number of different audiences for whom distance teaching has been used. These include:

- Alternatives to secondary education (e.g. the National Correspondence College of Zambia which offers secondary level courses either at a distance or through study centres and Indian Boards of Secondary Education which offer programmes of secondary schooling by correspondence).
- Alternatives to further or higher education (e.g. open universities existing in parallel with conventional universities such as the Open Universities of Britain and Sri Lanka and universities with distance-teaching departments such as the Universities of New England and Zambia).
- Job related or vocational training (e.g. through TAFE institutions in Australia and the Open Tech in Britain).
- Professional in-service or upgrading work (e.g. teacher training projects in many Commonwealth countries of the south and recent programmes in Britain for the training of professional groups such as pharmacists and town planners).
- Community education (e.g. programmes for public education which are not leading to qualifications but helping increase people's practical and social skills, such as programmes of public education run by the Mauritius College of the Air and of community education run by the British Open University).

Some institutions concentrate on a single audience; others address two or more of them.

Methods

5. Many programmes have in common that their teaching combines the use of print, face-to-face study and some broadcasting. Different combinations are used and there is different weighting, in terms of the comparative importance to the student or the institution, of these three media. Print most often carries the main burden of teaching. Face-to-face teaching, with its capacity for immediate two-way feedback and dialogue between student and tutor, or between student and student, is often seen as being of key importance despite the administrative difficulties it entails and the costs which it brings in its train. While broadcasts can be important in creating a public awareness of distance education, they often present difficulties of timing for students and teachers. The British Open University for example, has to put out broadcasts at 5 p.m. before many of its students have got home from work. At the University of the South Pacific where a satellite is available for distance education, the timing of satellite programmes is a major constraint.

6. Just as teaching methods vary, so, too, do organisational structures. These can usefully be classified along two dimensions. First some institutions teach only at a distance while others work in two modes, offering some courses at a distance and others face-to-face. There is a contrast, for example, between the Mauritius College of the Air, an institution defined by the teaching method it uses rather than by its audience, and the University of Zambia where a correspondence department exists in parallel with other departments of the University. Second, in some countries a single institution offers courses at a distance while, in others, universities compete or co-operate to serve their audiences. In Malaysia, for example, University Sains Malaysia is the sole university offering courses at a distance while in Australia five universities and a large number of colleges of advanced education all offer courses at a distance.

7. While we can identify different organisational patterns and set out some of their advantages and drawbacks, it would be wrong to define an organisational best buy. But the variety of experience means that there are important questions of choice about organisation which would confront any institutions moving into distance teaching for the first time. In the light of the Cambridge meeting the Secretariat should produce a review of experience of distance teaching in post-secondary education as a guide to decision makers.

8. Distance-teaching institutions vary, not only in their constitutional structure, but also in the educational strategies adopted for their day-to-day work and in particular in their strategies for developing course material. Some have followed the British Open University's example of arranging for a team of staff to work together over a period of years to produce materials. Others have relied on employing outside writers under contract, whose work is supervised by educators with skills in the production and presentation of material who are employed full-time by distance teaching organisations. Others have used a combination of regular university or college staff with outside consultants (see chapter 3 below).

Quality, Cost and Effectiveness

9. There are sharp differences of view about the quality which can be achieved in distance education. Some argue that it is necessarily a second best, inferior to face-to-face education. Others claim that it has positive advantages, in forcing students towards an individual approach and ability to study and understand which is the aim of much conventional education. Holders of both views may agree that it has particular advantages, as suggested above, in widening access to education, although the severest critics will argue that this is offering a second-best education to those who are already educationally disadvantaged. Resolving the debate is made more difficult by a lack of agreement about criteria of success, and by the lack of data about the educational effectiveness of distance education. The available evidence on these issues is examined in the next chapter.