

Chapter XXI

Social Implications of Three Different Models of Distributed Learning

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ABSTRACT

Distributed universities that use technology to support a social mission are a new phenomenon reflecting changing demands on higher education and the availability of new, facilitative technologies. This chapter describes three different models of distributing education to achieve different social missions: a distance teaching university (The UK Open University), a multicampus higher education institute servicing remote and rural areas in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (UHI Millennium Institute), and a new university in Greece spread over five small islands (University of the Aegean). The chapter considers the different social missions and the ways in which the choice of technologies supports distributed teaching and research. International activities are also described and future trends considered. An initial typology for considering institutions of distributed learning is proposed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the social implications of three quite different institutional models for providing flexible higher education. Different technologies, different aspects of flexibility, and

different venues for learning account for the variation in the models described. These, in turn, reflect different cultural imperatives and have different implications for learners.

The three institutions studied in this chapter are:

1. **The UK Open University (OU)**, which is a mass distance-education institution set up originally by a Labour Government to provide a second chance for the many UK adults who had no opportunity to attend university at the age of 18.
2. The very new **UHI Millennium Institute (UHI)**, which has been set up to provide higher education for people in rural and remote areas in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.
3. **The University of the Aegean (UA)**, located on five different islands in the Aegean Sea and established as the first Greek University to fully utilise Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in its everyday activities, and thus, implementing the Information Society in Greek higher education.

As the notion of a distributed university is central to the underlying model of these institutions, the chapter begins with a discussion about this vexed term. The focus then moves to an analysis of the differences resulting from the three models described, using the categories: social imperatives, technologies, and international activities. The chapter concludes with a look forward at some future trends of these three institutions. The objective throughout the chapter is to highlight the ways in which the social and cultural mission of these institutions has led to the development of different models. The social implications of the establishment and growth of an institution of higher education in a region may be distinct but as this chapter indicates, they may also be overlapping. Considerable academic analysis has been undertaken recently to investigate the relationship between “knowledge laboratories” and regional economies, and shows the inter-relationship between social implications and the establishment of an institution of higher education (Cooke & Piccaluga, 2004).

BACKGROUND

The term “distributed,” in relation to education, particularly higher education, encompasses a number of different practices. For some the term is synonymous with distance education and e-learning (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001); others prefer to distinguish between these terms. For example, according to the Web site of Tarleton State University (2004):

Although the phrases “distributed education” and “distance education” are often used interchangeably, distributed education has a broader meaning. The primary characteristic of distance education is that learning takes place independently of place and time, allowing students to absorb the content from a distance. On the other hand, the principal goal of distributed education is to customize learning environments to better-fit different learning styles, whether students are on or off campus. In this new pedagogical model, students are encouraged to learn in an interactive and collaborative environment.

Distance education is a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. Distributed education can occur either on or off campus, providing students with greater flexibility and eliminating time as a barrier to learning. A common feature of both distance and distributed learning is technology. Regardless of whether students are on campus or online, there are many implications of integrating technology into education, i.e., in making learning distributed. (p.1)

“Blended learning” is another term that encompasses a range of different practices. Usually it refers to learning that combines face-to-face teaching with online resources. The learners may be full-time campus students, or they may be located partially on campus and partially at a distance. Although these terms are always changing in their application, it might be fairly

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