Chapter I

An Overview of Virtual University Studies: Issues, Concepts, Trends

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ABSTRACT
This chapter provides an overview of virtual university studies pertaining to issues, concepts and trends. Although numerous papers, reports and booklets are published with respect to that, there is still lack of an overview of virtual universities. In this chapter, the author tries to draw basic directions of the virtual university studies and developments. These basic directions grasp virtual universities' issues, concepts and trends in general, model, definition and basic characteristics of virtual universities in particular. The author goes on giving some educational and financial features of future higher education. It is discussed that virtual universities and distance learning are currently lacking in some areas that need to be paid attention to in the future. The chapter concludes with some recommendations for the future designers of virtual universities and distance learning programs.

INTRODUCTION
Numerous papers, books, seminars workshops and conferences are dedicated to the introduction and study of virtual universities (VUs). However, there is still lacking a profound concept and overall view of VUs, and their related issues and
aspects. This chapter is a starting work to present an overview of important aspects of VUs, where most related issues and aspects are categorized, classified, defined and briefly studied.

Virtual University: What is the Meaning of “Virtual”? 

Recently many universities have started projects, written papers, and organized meetings and workshops dealing with the development of “virtual university.” Analyzing what is really done or meant with this, you may find the following activities:

- Teaching materials—programs, syllabi, courses, assignments, etc.—are posted to the intranet/Internet in a way that allows students to access them from anywhere at anytime.
- All the course and teaching materials could be accessible by all branches of the university and other partner universities in order to deliver them simultaneously to different students at different locations.
- Study programs could be as selectable and flexible, as they on one hand meet the demands of quality education; on the other hand, they meet exactly the needs and goals of the students.
- All university services and functions (such as administration, library, social life, meetings with staff and lecturers, cafes and so on) are simulated on the Internet so that no physical interaction will be needed any more to complete a study program.
- A central institution offers combinations of study programs or courses from different universities to create one’s own curriculum (broker institution).

The above mentioned are just some representative features of a VU. They don’t claim to be complete coverage of such features. In reality, VUs and related features progress and change so dynamically that it is hard to make any ultimate list of features.

The Information Age and the ICT developments provided an opportunity for new levels of multi-institutional, multistate and multinational collaboration to provide postsecondary education and training through existing and emerging global networks. Collaborating institutions can deliver modules, courses and degrees to individuals and groups of learners who interact with faculty and with organized learning materials, in both real-time and delayed-time (asynchronous) modes. This enriched educational environment envisioned by many academic leaders is captured in the phrase “the virtual university” (Twigg & Oblinger, 1996).

What is the Mission of VU? 

The mission of a VU is explained by the challenge of our time to the higher education system, which is formulated as follows: Evolving from an Industrial
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