A Case Study of a Distance Degree Program in Vietnam:
Examples from a Learner–Centered Approach to Distance Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The English Department at Högskolan Dalarna, Sweden, participates in a distance-learning program with the Faculty of Education at Vietnam National University. Students who enroll in this program are teachers of English at secondary or tertiary institutions, and will study half time for two years to complete a Master's degree in English Linguistics. The distance program, adapted specifically to accommodate the Vietnamese students in terms of cultural differences as well as inexperience with distance methodology, is characterized by three design features: testing, technical training, and fostering a community of learners. The design of the courses also reflects a learner-centered approach that addresses common problem areas in distance education by promoting interactivity. Central to the overall program is the maintenance of different channels of communication, reflecting an effort to support the students academically and socially, both as individuals and members of a learning community. In this way, the effects of physical and cultural distances are minimized.

1. INTRODUCTION

The principles and techniques of distance education enable the processes of teaching and learning without the requirement of shared physical space. In other words, education can be delivered across great distances, and historically, distance education has meant that learning need not be confined within geographical or political borders. Significant advances in information technology have also greatly facilitated interpersonal interaction, awarding distance education the potential to be a more communicative experience. Consequently, distance programs are increasingly serving as forums for intercultural communication and exchange.

Accounting for different cultural traditions of education, however, can pose a challenge to the administration of any academic program, and distance programs are certainly no exception. Not only do instructors need to develop their teaching methodology and course content for the distance platform (or, indeed, adapt existing techniques and materials), they must also consider the profile of their students in terms of how familiar they are 1) with the educational culture specific to the degree program and 2) with distance education practices in general. The combination of distance-oriented methodology, disperse geographical locations, and different cultures or traditions of education can be likened to a pedagogical perfect storm. Course and program design should therefore reflect an effort to prevent the demands of teaching from being compounded by physical and cultural distances.

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This chapter presents Högskolan Dalarna's Master's degree in English Linguistics as a case study of a distance degree program. The focus of the chapter includes both the creation of the program and design of the distance courses, each of which illustrates a learner-centered approach to distance education. In creating the degree program, several features emerged as defining characteristics; these are presented in section 3 of the chapter. Section 4 is a presentation of general course design, in particular how technology can be used in distance courses to deliver content, facilitate communica-

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