

Diverse Models of Distance Teaching Universities

Sarah Guri-Rosenblit

The Open University of Israel, Israel

INTRODUCTION

Universities offering studies through distance teaching methods vary enormously in how they were initiated, the clienteles they aim to serve, how they are funded, and the kinds of programs they offer. Distance teaching at the university level is provided currently through at least five major organizational models: single-mode distance teaching universities, dual- and mixed-mode universities, extensions, consortia-type ventures, and virtual technology-based universities.

Each of these models can be divided into additional subgroups. The fully fledged distance teaching universities, for instance, are treated in the relevant literature as a generic group, but differ from each other in many respects (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). Some are operating as huge national universities, while others function on a limited provincial level. Few adopted an open admission policy, while most others require the same entry requirements as their conventional counterparts, and so forth. The dual- and the mixed-mode universities, as well as the consortia-type ventures, constitute nowadays the leading models of distance teaching provision. They operate in many national settings and represent a rich composition of diverse higher education institutions, such as research- versus mainly teaching-oriented universities, large and small establishments, fully accredited or experimental-in-nature universities, and those offering mainly continuing education courses versus full academic degrees. However, this overview analyzes only the underlying premises of distance teaching in each of the five major models. Its scope does not allow discussing in detail the subgroups contained in each model.

In spite of the visible differences between the various models of distance teaching at the university level, there was a common trend of blending boundaries between distance and campus universities that

took place in the last decade all over the world. Institutions that traditionally offered solely conventional instruction are now becoming distance education providers. The democratization of higher education and the emergence of the new information and communication technologies constitute the main reasons for this change of boundaries. The new technologies have prompted nearly all higher education institutions to enter the “distance education business” at various levels of experimentation and application (AFT, 2001; Bates, 1999, 2001; Bradburn, 2002; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Evans & Nation, 2000; Littleton & Light, 1999; National Research Council, 2002; Selinger & Pearson, 1999; Trow, 1999).

The new information and communication technologies have drastically changed the status of distance education within the academic world. Traditionally, distance teaching was considered as operating on the margins of higher education systems (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, 2001). Since the 19th century, correspondence institutions, extensions, and distance teaching universities opened the gates of academe to diverse clienteles that, for a variety of reasons, were unable to attend regular face-to-face classes and remained outside the conventional universities. The target populations, studying through distance education, were considered as distinct and special, usually older than the cohorts at classical universities and mostly “second chance” students according to a variety of criteria. Nowadays, millions of people, both traditional students and working adults, are studying through distance teaching methods for a plethora of reasons and purposes.

This overview puts a special focus on examining both the merits and problems associated with the utilization of the new information and communication technologies in the context of each of the five major models of universities teaching via distance education methods.

SINGLE-MODE DISTANCE TEACHING UNIVERSITIES

Most of the large single-mode distance teaching universities were established since the early 1970s, following the model of the British Open University. There are currently over 30 such institutions in various parts of the world. Some argued that the distance teaching universities have been a natural evolution from prior generations of distance education, as they raised much of the same concerns as their predecessors (Bell & Tight, 1993). But most others perceive the single-mode distance teaching universities as unique institutions that have marked a new era in distance higher education and have provided it with a new legitimacy and pride (Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). One conspicuous characteristic that distinguishes these universities from most of their early predecessors is their being a product of top-down governmental planning as large-scale universities aimed at broadening access to higher education at a lower cost as compared to campus-based universities (Daniel, 1996; Peters, 2001; Rumble, 1996).

One of the main areas in which the single-mode distance teaching universities choose to excel is the development of high-quality study materials, produced by teams of experts and designed to stimulate and improve self-study (Bates, 1995, 1999; Daniel, 1996). The well-articulated study materials replaced ordinary textbooks and low-level correspondence courses, and have been used extensively not only by the distance teaching universities' students, but also by many students at conventional universities in different national settings. The production of such courses is most expensive, but they are developed by a small number of academics and studied by large numbers of students. The simple underlying formula of the distance teaching universities' operation has stated that, as the number of students increases, the cost per student decreases (Peters, 2001). This simple formula constitutes one of the main *raison d'être* of the mega distance teaching universities (Daniel, 1996).

The new information and communication technologies challenge this very basic formula, as well as

the whole organizational infrastructure of the single-mode distance teaching universities. The shift to new technologies demands a major overhaul of their whole operation, and another huge investment in setting up a totally new infrastructure for developing and delivering their courses (Bates, 2001; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, 2003). The new technologies enable the updating of study materials on an ongoing basis and facilitate interactions between students and teachers, and among students. In other words, they alleviate two of the major disadvantages of traditional distance teaching, but at the same time, they highlight the importance of interactions with expert teachers in the actual study process. Most of the large-scale distance teaching universities are based on relatively small academic staffs, and cannot afford the hiring of many more academics in order to facilitate student-professor interaction in most of their large courses, studied frequently by thousands of students (Guri-Rosenblit, 2003). So, the new information and communication technologies have their pros and cons in the contextual setting of the large distance teaching universities.

In the debate on the "life expectancy" of the large distance teaching universities, some claim that the days of the large distance universities have passed. Their sheer size and industrial way of working have made them vulnerable to increasing competition in the markets of higher education. Both factors will hinder them from responding to meet rapid developments in the postindustrial society (Evans & Nation, 2000; Rumble, 1996). The fact is that most large distance teaching universities have incorporated the new technologies so far to a very limited extent (Bates, 2001; Guri-Rosenblit, 2003). Their study process is still based, by and large, on printed self-study materials. The establishment of new large-scale distance teaching universities has slowed down since the mid-1980s. It is likely that very few new single-mode distance teaching universities will emerge in the future. Part of the reason is that there is no need for more than one large distance teaching university in most national systems. The well-established distance teaching universities are likely to continue functioning and to have distinct roles in the framework of their higher education systems.

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