

Evolution of Post-Secondary Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education is an increasingly common educational alternative, as well as a key contributor to the newly competitive landscape in higher education. Once regarded as an experimental alternative outside mainstream university education, distance education has attained new levels of legitimacy and expansion and has grown into a higher education industry of its own. This article discusses the history and transformation of distance education to create a framework for the sequence of events that have contributed to the distance education movements and shaped modern post-secondary distance education programs.

The article outlines the evolution of post-secondary distance education from its inception to the present: its progression from informal programs offered by individual providers to a well-organised formal educational alternative; its purpose and characteristics; its expansion and internationalisation; and the various forces that have shaped its growth. While noting that technology has its limitations—it can facilitate teaching but not replace it—the article highlights the crucial role that advancements in technology have played in propelling the evolution of distance education, and points to the role of technology in blurring the conceptual divide between distance and traditional education.

BACKGROUND

Although there is no universal consensus on the origin of distance education, most researchers trace its roots to the emergence of correspondence education in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe (Great Britain, France, Germany) and the United States (Matthews, 1999; Peek, 2000; Ponzurick, France, & Logar, 2000). It was the English educator Sir Isaac Pitman who foresaw a need to deliver instruction to a student population that was limitless in comparison to the traditional classroom, and reach out to students in various locations (Matthews, 1999).

In the early years, distance education was dominated by individual entrepreneurs who worked alone; later, organised formal education institutions emerged, such as Sir Isaac Pitman Correspondence Colleges in Britain, and a school in Berlin to teach language by correspondence (Holmberg,

1995; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000). At the same time, universities in Great Britain, such as Oxford and Cambridge, began to develop extension services. This university extension movement included not only traveling lectures, but also a system of correspondence education (Holmberg, 1995). In the United States, the earliest instance of distance education dates back to 1728 when an advertisement in a Boston newspaper offered weekly shorthand lessons by mail (Gilbert, 2001).

While initially, distance learning was envisioned as:

a way to serve students who lacked access to a complete education, whether due to insufficient resources, geographic isolation, or physical disabilities, it evolved to become a viable way to supplement programs and support innovation, rather than being merely a better-than-nothing alternative to doing without. (Weinstein, 1997, p. 24)

While some scholars identify Pitman as the initiator of correspondence education, other researchers recognise American educator William Rainey Harper as the pioneer of modern post-secondary correspondence teaching (Mood, 1995). Harper helped organise the Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts (New York), the first institution to receive, in 1883, official recognition of correspondence education; from 1883 to 1891, the college was authorised to grant academic degrees to students who successfully completed work through correspondence education and summer workshops.

DISTANCE EDUCATION: EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

Growth in Distance Education Programs

The number of distance education programs has increased steadily from the mid-nineteenth century. For nearly 200 years, correspondence education was the primary means of distance education delivery, but in the late 1960s distance education reached a turning point with the introduction of a multimedia approach to its delivery; in addition to print, programs were also delivered through radio, television, audio, and video materials (Matthews, 1999).

In 1969, the Open University was established in the United Kingdom. This institution had a tremendous impact on distance education because it used a multimedia approach to teaching. The British Open University pioneered distance education on a massive international scale and, together with other open universities, helped raise the profile of distance education. For example, in Germany, the FernUniversität in Hagen was founded in 1974 (Matthews, 1999). However, the most dramatic growth of distance education programs has occurred from the 1980s until the present time. Since the mid 1990s, distance education programs have further transitioned into computer-based formats that enable the programs to be delivered fully or in part through the Internet. By the mid 1990s, nearly 25% of the colleges and universities in the United States offered degrees and certificates exclusively through distance education programs; the number grew to almost 58% 5 years later (Matthews, 1999).

In Asia, open and distance education has experienced an unparalleled growth, especially since the early 1990s, as the demand for learning in the region outstripped the capacity of traditional delivery methods by universities. Currently, almost all the countries in Asia have at least an open university. These universities command huge student populations, and of the 11 mega-universities (student enrolment of at least 100,000) worldwide, seven are located in Asia: China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, Iran and Turkey (Shive & Jegede, 2001).

In Australia, in the past few decades, postsecondary education has developed an increasingly international orientation as the government encouraged universities to export their courses and import students (Marginson, 2004). Consequently, the export of Australian education now constitutes Australia's third largest services export after tourism and transport, and is judged to be Australia's fastest growing export sector (AVCC, 2005).

Forces Driving Distance Education

One of the major contributors to the dramatic growth of distance education has been technology. Advances in technology, including computer conferencing, interactive media, digital technologies, and the Internet have transformed the world into a borderless educational arena (Frantz & King, 2000). The new technologies significantly increase the reach of distance provision; they enable content to be current; they allow students to interact with instructors and with each other at any time; and, they open up a global market. The technologies not only offer new and better ways of communicating at a distance, but also have the potential to reduce the fixed costs of education (Taylor, 2001).

In addition to advances in technology, there are several other forces driving distance education including: the arrival of the Information Age, changing demographics, changing work and social patterns, declining government funding

for further education, and competition in the educational market.

The transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age has brought about appreciation of intellectual capital, which is now regarded as a valuable commodity. Cunningham et al. (2000) pointed out that the arrival of the Information Age heralded a new conception of knowledge. While previously, knowledge was of importance to an educated elite, and was applicable to a limited range of professions, its present cachet is much broader: it applies to a wide workforce, and it encompasses a variety of skills including "thinking skills, teaming capacity, and communication skills" (Cunningham et al., 2000, p. 21). Thus, knowledge workers represent a growing proportion of today's workforce, and the value of intellectual capital drives the demand for continuing education and emphasises a shortened lifespan of knowledge (Cunningham et al., 2000).

The explosion of knowledge, one of the consequences of the Information Age, also promotes distance education. There is a proliferation of new information: "in the past, information doubled every ten years; now it doubles every four years" (Aslanian, 2001, p. 6). It is no longer possible to *know everything*, even about one specialized discipline, so the aim of education must be *learning to learn* (Cunningham et al., 2000). Therefore, education can no longer be regarded as preparation for work, but rather as a lifelong effort to ensure employability rather than employment.

In view of these changing demands on the workforce, employees and employers alike increasingly regard adequate training as a valuable commodity; for employees "the opportunity for training is becoming one of the most desirable benefits any job can offer" (Cetron & Davies, 2005, p. 43); and, employers view "employee training as a good investment" (Cetron & Davies, 2005, p. 49). Thus, some of the changes underpinning the growing demand for lifelong learning "will demand short accelerated programs, well-suited for online delivery, and portfolio credentials" (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2004); this, in turn, will drive the growing demand for distance education.

Changing demographics are also a driving force in distance education (Jones, 2001). High school leavers now represent only one type of tertiary student. Another type, increasingly growing in importance, is composed of adult learners, referred to by Cunningham et al. (2000) as *earner-learners*, who have paid jobs and seek postsecondary qualifications to maintain and enhance their careers. In addition, the importance of lifelong learning has shifted: it can no longer be regarded as a "discretionary personal investment; it has become an essential personal investment as people scramble to bolster their credentials in a volatile global work place" (Jones, 2001, p. 109). Lifelong learners represent a large and rapidly growing student body and demand relevant and accessible continuing professional development programs (Jones, 2001).

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