

THE WYE STORY

Paul Smith & Jon Gregson

We believe this is a story worth telling, based as it is on more than two decades of the provision of postgraduate distance education for development, under the auspices of the University of London's External System, which is in 2008 celebrating its 150th anniversary. By relating this brief, potted history, we hope to demonstrate how a continually evolving model of professional distance learning provision, undertaken within a traditional tertiary education institutional context, has sought to meet changing needs, demands and circumstances. We hope that some of the lessons learned will give an insight for those seeking to develop their own distance learning programmes in the development field.

The first decade

The potential for creating a distance learning programme at Wye College was first realised in the mid 1980s by a visionary Professor of Agricultural Economics, Ian Carruthers, who subsequently became the first Director of the Wye External Programme (WEP). Ian crossed the divide between the natural and the social sciences, having gained an undergraduate degree in horticulture before going on to complete a PhD in development economics. He saw there was a niche in the postgraduate education market in the field of Agricultural Development that Wye could fill by running quality, cross-disciplinary, applied courses for an international audience.

Wye College, a constituent college of the University of London since 1894, had longstanding research and teaching links in the developing world, and particularly in Africa, and the provision of distance learning courses with no requirement to be on campus was seen as a cost effective way of meeting demand for postgraduate study in the development field. What London External could provide was the ability to offer a quality-assured examination system almost anywhere in the world, with no requirement to come to London, and this comparative advantage in distance education terms has remained with the Programme to the present day.

With a modest initial grant from the University of London's External System a three year course development phase, led by Dr Henry Bernstein from the Open University, culminated in the presentation of the MSc in Agricultural Development in 1988. This was supported initially by a number of bursaries provided by the Rockefeller Foundation for students from low income countries.

It was always going to take a while for the concept of distance learning to take hold in what was, first and foremost, a research and full-time teaching institution, and the pioneer academics who contributed to these early courses are to be applauded for sticking to their guns, because this form of education did not enjoy universal support in the College. This tension between face-to-face, full time campus-based teaching and teaching at a distance is certainly not uncommon in dual-mode set ups such as existed at Wye. The development of quality distance learning programmes requires a very considerable resource commitment in terms of time, finance and, most importantly, personnel.

Selected quotes from a newspaper article written some seven years after the first students enrolled provide a flavour of those early days:

"Few students of Wye College will ever set foot in the small Kent village of that name in future. The reason is that the agricultural college of the University of London plans to double student numbers on its distance-learning courses to more than 1,500 in the next ten years. Wye's external programme has blossomed since it first pioneered international distance learning at masters' level in 1988. "There now must be 40 out of 70 teaching and research staff involved in the external programme," says John Prescott, Principal of Wye.

The programme is the brainchild of Ian Carruthers, Professor of Agrarian Development at Wye, and external programme director and director of short courses. Students may register for a single course, diploma or an MSc, for completion in up to five years, on the agricultural development or environmental management programmes

Administrator Anne Weekes says: "Ours is an alternative, not a second-best option, which older correspondence courses might have been, for those who cannot study full time." It is also less costly. The masters course costs a third as much as bringing an overseas student to the United Kingdom, says Professor Carruthers.

Some 785 students are enrolled, compared with 580 undergraduates and 330 full-time postgraduates at Wye. They all sit their exams on the same days in October, this year at 105 sites worldwide, after a 35-week academic year, running from February to October.

"At first we thought we could just tidy up the notes from existing courses and put them out," says deputy director Jane Bryson. They were quickly disabused of this when Henry Bernstein - recently appointed professor of development studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies - joined Wye from the Open University to help develop the early course material. "We started with a clean sheet and planned the curriculum we wanted," says Dr Bryson. "You have to be very precise and leave no ambiguity. If you come across something that is not clear you have to say why, otherwise students lose heart."

Materials are updated annually with major revisions about every five years. Despite computers, course materials are still print based and sent by courier to each student. Students may require a computer for some optional courses but not the core courses. Today, many students fax their tutor-marked assignments back to Wye, and electronic mail improves communications between students and staff.

The programme is self-funding, and franchising now provides additional income, with the University of Sindh in Pakistan and the University of the West Indies both using Wye materials under licence to develop their own distance-learning degree programmes. "What Wye franchisees are getting is quality at marginal cost" says Professor Carruthers. Launching a distance-learning Masters is expensive!

In Zimbabwe, the government's extension service, with support from the Overseas Development Administration, has contracted the external programme to train more than 60 of its extension staff to MSc level. There is a part-time staff member in Zimbabwe to run tutorials.

All distance learning programmes, however, have high drop-out rates, often around 50 per cent, says Dr Bryson. Students may leave for a huge variety of reasons - death, illness, job change or because they cannot settle into distance-learning study - but early results show that Wye retains about 65 per cent of students right through."

These quotes are apposite in that they provide a telling summary of what went to make a successful distance learning set-up. Careful reading and interpolation help us to uncover some key lessons for the production of needs or demand driven distance educational provision. Following are ten points that helped to deliver success:

- Delivery of quality course materials for in-country study all over the world;
- Cost-effectiveness of distance learning compared to full time study in the UK;
- Flexibility of access for postgraduate study: from short course, to certificate, to MSc level;
- Importance of academic commitment to distance learning, allied to research based teaching resource provision;
- Need for a dedicated distance learning team, comprising academic, academic-related and administrative staff;
- Putting the learners first, developing core curricula from scratch, not re-cycled lecture notes;
- Developing a blended approach to learning with a balance between text-based and computer-based learning;
- Developing partnerships with academic institutions for capacity building in developing countries;
- Continuous programme of monitoring and revision;
- Overall support from the University of London External System.

If we put some flesh on these bones we can see a picture emerging of a continuing evolving programme of development, seeking to meet newly emerging demands with a quality-assured supply of rigorously prepared course materials. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 provided the impetus for the launch of what was to become a flagship programme for WEP. When presented in 1993 the MSc and Postgraduate Diploma in Environmental Management had an initial registration target of 50 students. It in fact recruited three times that figure and it has remained a front-line programme for more than a decade. This was a case of getting the right product at the right time.

On the basis of this new degree programme and the achievements of Agricultural Development in providing a steady stream of successful graduates, the College became the recipient of one of the inaugural Queen's Anniversary Prizes in 1994 for the contribution of the Wye EP to higher education in an international context. The citing read as follows:

Wye College, University of London Professional development at a distance.

A significant and innovative international university programme providing distance learning courses in rural development and environmental management. It reaches 100 countries enabling them to obtain quality training without leaving the workplace.

Citation "These programmes bring great benefit to developing agricultural economies across the world. They cement a continuing connection with the UK".

The Distance Learning Programme at Wye has gone from strength to strength since then, gaining a variety of significant funding inputs from the Rockefeller and the Ford Foundations, the Linbury Trust and the UK government's Darwin Initiative and Commonwealth Scholarships' Commission, and enjoying continuing substantive support from the University of London. These supports led in turn to the development of several new MSc programmes in the 1990s and into the new millennium: Food Industry Management and Marketing in 1995, Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in 1998 and Biodiversity Conservation and Management in 2000.

New Challenges in the New Millennium

When Wye merged with Imperial College London in 2000 this provided new challenges and also the benefit of a new brand image. With an emphasis on a stronger "science" input the Biodiversity Conservation and Management MSc has continued to be a popular option. The press release at the launch of the new programme gives some further insights into our evolving processes:

Professor David Ingram, Head of the Darwin Initiative, which funded the development work on the programme, and Master of St Catharines College, University of Cambridge, gave the Keynote Address at the launch on 23 October 2000. He noted that the new MSc in Biodiversity Conservation "offers an exciting and innovative venture in this expanding field. Imperial College at Wye has twelve years of experience in providing postgraduate distance learning worldwide and currently has almost 1,000 students studying MSc and Diploma courses in 120 countries".

Professor John Beddington said: "This new MSc represents a timely response to the increasing demand from international organisations for innovative distance learning materials that seek to meet the educational challenges set by the Convention on Biological Diversity."

The MSc programme has been developed in collaboration with the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Birmingham. Its principal elements were all major agenda items, concerned with identified areas of need, at the May meeting of the Conference of the Parties in Nairobi, the fifth such gathering within the aegis of the Convention on Biological Diversity:

- It provides education in the broad sense for continuing professional development worldwide.
- It takes a multidisciplinary approach, in that it is science based with a strong emphasis on policy issues and the sustainable use of genetic resources.
- It is concerned essentially (although not exclusively) with agricultural biodiversity.
- It offers a particular opportunity for scientists and other professionals in developing countries to help them to meet their obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The course can be taken wholly in country and there is no requirement to attend Imperial College at Wye. All tutoring will be offered on-line, with Wye's developing expertise in computer-mediated learning and networked support systems.

These quotes reveal further clues about the development of materials and related teaching support leading up to the present. It is worth looking at this in a little more detail.

Developments in learning technology and learner support

Going back roughly a decade, the Wye distance learning programme followed what could be regarded as a traditional correspondence course model. This involved supporting students with printed learning materials comprising books and a study guide, with some course modules also including an audio or videocassette.

Since that time, many new approaches have become possible due to the advance of technology, and we have sought to be at the forefront of innovation within distance learning and support in the University of London. The programme currently supports 1100 registered students, located in more than one hundred different countries. Given the diverse contexts within which our students live and work, the commitment to innovation provides a unique and major challenge, as there is no single package of solutions that suits all our students. Often a blended learning approach provides the most appropriate solution.

Just as organisations should be led by a vision and mission and not by technology and systems, good educational design is shaped by appropriate pedagogy and a commitment to understanding the learning process and context of the learners. Within the programme much of the learning technology work is therefore responding to the results of careful research, evaluation and communication with our student community. We take the opportunity whenever possible to meet students in their home countries.

A current area of research is piloting the use of mobile devices (e.g. cell phones and PDAs) and exploring ways in which they promote access and can provide effective support tools for learners. This project is reported by Jon Gregson in another submission for the PCF5 ([make the link](#)).

In 2001, The DLPs LearningTechnology team was set up and soon began to explore how the Internet could help us develop a stronger sense of a learning community with potential for academic discussion with peers, and a more direct way of communicating with tutors than was possible via the TMAs. Nowadays there are a number of established 'Virtual Learning Environments' (VLEs) offered by commercial organisations ,e.g. WebCT, and also being developed by the Open Source software community e.g. MOODLE.

However these were not available when the learning technology team started their work in the area of online environments, and the team set out to design an environment that would suit the needs of our distance learning community, and address the requirements of students based in countries where Internet access was slow or unreliable. This remains the reason why the OLE does not include a lot of fancy design graphics that could take a long time to download.

The development of an OLE has brought us into closer contact with many of our students, and has been the catalyst for us to consider how best to develop an inclusive and fair tutoring model that meets the needs of our entire student community irrespective of their level of access to technology. The result is, that although students can still choose whether or not to interact with tutors, tutoring itself has become more and more prominent and a mainstream activity within the programme .

We now make a very substantial annual investment in this process, both in terms of time, people and finance, and the challenge is for us to allocate and use our resources in the best way possible. The tutor's role has been developing significantly,

and we continue to work on ways to support the tutors effectively through sharing ideas about best practice and face-to-face annual workshops.

The objective to turn printed materials into a form of 'interactive courseware' has been on the agenda for the last five years, and one possibility that was considered but discounted was to put the courses wholly 'online'. The DLP's strategy is not to turn wholly into an online e-learning programme, but to remain firmly a distance learning programme that makes use of e-learning tools and approaches to support the learning process. This is an important distinction, and provides us with a strategy that enables us to continue to support students globally on courses that have particular relevance in developing countries.

The progress so far represents only the first phase of our ambitions for courseware design, as there is much that could be done through adding audio visual content, turning the courses into a richer multimedia experience. We are also working through underlying issues of how to make the authoring process as good as possible. This involves organising our learning resources in ways that makes them quick to update or replace, and if possible, easily reusable and compliant with emerging standards for sharing and storing through online repositories.

Where we are now and looking to the future

The most recent programme to be brought on stream, the MSc in Sustainable Development, launched in 2005, is currently receiving widespread support from learners across the globe. It was the first programme to use the blended learning approach to studying described above and has become a model for transforming our other MSc programmes that are in the process of being revised and rationalised.

In preparation is an MSc in Poverty Reduction for a 2009 presentation, under the auspices of the Global Food and Agricultural University (GOFU) in co-operation with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). This will be the first MSc to be launched within Wye's new home in the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) following its merger in 2007 after Imperial College left the University of London. The new title for the distance learning programme is the Centre for Development, Environment and Policy (CeDEP).

In the future we expect to see further developments particularly as the ICT infrastructure improves in developing countries promoting more widespread, reliable and affordable access. With the growth in broadband we will be able to look more realistically at the option of making greater use of synchronous online tools which support video conferencing and live discussions. There is also scope for looking beyond online environments and exploring use of 'blogs' and 'wikis', and perhaps most significantly, at what can be done with increasingly powerful mobile devices that students can take with them on field visits and have wherever they are.

There are interesting possibilities relating to collaboration with international partners that, with the right technology in place, may also enable us to enhance tutoring and research supervision through a more international network of experts. The development of the Wye Connect magazine and our website offers scope for wider sharing of our students work, and in particular the dissemination of some of the valuable insights gained from the research projects.

We would welcome enquiries from anyone who is interested in following up this story from whatever angle. The following links will enable this:

The CeDEP website where you can access copies of our Journal "Wye Connect" amongst other things and navigate to other related links:
<http://www.cefims.ac.uk/cedep/dlp/about/news/latest.htm>

Paul Smith is available at word.smith@virgin.net

Jon Gregson is available at: jon.gregson@soas.ac.uk

Paul Smith & Jon Gregson
Fellows of the Centre for Distance Education, University of London
March 2008