GOING THE DISTANCE: MAKING DISTANCE LEARNING (DL) WORK.

THEME: FORMAL EDUCATION
Sub theme : quality issues.

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Distance learning (DL) is back in vogue in the UK. It is out of the doldrums in terms of institutional and national interest, which is where it has been for a while. I mean DL, not e –learning or flexible learning or open learning or technology enhanced learning. It is possible that all of these things are in the mind of the new promoters of DL. But the idea that is so appealing to the new advocates is that students do not have to be full time, will pay fees – high fees perhaps – will not demand much in terms of campus services **and** may well live overseas and not be counted against HEFC grant income. (The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) distributes public money to universities and colleges in England that provide higher education.) Politicians as well as educational leaders are talking DL. David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science in the UK, has recently suggested that DL is the way to go. None of this is surprising given the cuts in public expenditure and thus funding going to Universities, the cap on student numbers, the pressure on Universities to diversify their funding and restricted immigration and visa approvals. In addition, in the UK, the costs of undertaking a full time degree coupled with the recession has led many young people to consider DL. The UK Open University for instance is experiencing an "unprecedented" 34% increase in 18 to 24-year-olds applying for distance learning degrees (BBCa).

But will this mean that in the dash to get DL income, good practice (and DL values) will be abandoned or even rejected? Frequently, I hear colleagues say 'we can't afford to do that' (usually said in the context of student services and why they are deemed a luxury), or 'it is all we can do to write the content – we don't have time to think about anything else' (frequently said in the context of course design and planning).

I don't have much sympathy with those who say they can't afford decent student services. By which I mean proactive student services - academic support, teaching and assessment, and timely comprehensive and personalised feedback. Because the people who say this are invariably those who are keen on the income derived from student fees. These people have failed to realise that if they treat DL as a business – (I don't have a problem with this per se) – they have to understand that the provision of the aforementioned services are the equivalent of customer service. Moreover, charging high fees and leaving students to sink or swim is quite shameful - especially when the fee income comes from students in the developing world. I am more sympathetic with academics who have little understanding that lecture notes are not the same as DL study materials or that 'pod casting' their lectures are not the equivalent of integrating learning technologies into a well designed learning experience. Invariably these academics have been tasked to produce DL courses off the corner of their desk with no release from other duties and no professional support in course design and development.

 A high demand for distance learning coupled with the idea that DL mints money could lead to a scenario where we return to first generation DL - where the majority of student's on private correspondence courses dropped out or failed to complete. A recent edition of the BBC's Money Programme reported on a sharp rise in complaints about distance learning courses. 'The Trading Standards Institute has investigated complaints which include instances of plagiarism – where course materials are simply cheaply produced copies of self-study books sold over the internet for exorbitant prices -, and others where tutor support is either poor or non-existent. Dissatisfied students are being encouraged to take action under the Supply of Goods and Services Act, and educational charities are now calling for government regulation of private training providers (Oxford Home Schooling). The commodification of higher education will inevitably mean that complaints against University DL provision will increase.

Back in 1992 there was a lively debate in the journal Open Leaning around Greville Rumble's paper 'The Competitive Vulnerability of Distance Teaching Universities' (Rumble 1992). In this article, he argued that distance-teaching universities (DTU's) were vulnerable to competition from campus-based universities (CBU's) which were adopting distance education as one of their modes of delivery, and becoming dual-mode universities (DMUs). Both Vernon White and Ian Mugridge's (1992) responses in the following issue of the journal presaged the literature on the blurring of boundaries between CBUs and DTUs. And until recently this might have been regarded as the informed and hegemonic view – the convergence of DL and contiguous education made possible by new learning technologies and e-learning. E-learning (the tool) had become distance learning (the mode). Distance education as an area in its own right or as a separate area of professional expertise was seen to be increasingly marginalised and many central units set up to support DL in established DMUs were broken up and devolved as instructional designers and educational technologists were placed within faculty units (See Bates 2006). At the same time, individual academics were encouraged to develop innovative approaches to their students' learning using the range of available e-learning tools. The interest of these technology savvy academics was e-learning tools and technology enhanced learning, not distance learners or the historic mandate of distance learning to provide access for non-traditional learners, and definitely not in the systems and processes that ensure that DL works. The 'mainstreaming 'of DL put the very existence of DL at risk (Bullen 2004 and 2008).

Current political, economic, and social pressures are leading educational leaders to look again at the benefits of DL. These benefits arise from very different operational approaches than those typically found in the academy. However, it is unclear whether this is understood by the new DL advocates. For DL to be institutionally sustainable and not just a number of individual departmental initiatives, it has to be recognised that it is a whole-institution enterprise. In effect, distance learning has to be viewed by institutional managements as both a production and service industry with production and service industry quality standards. A production industry that creates, maintains, and delivers (paper and/or virtual) courses. And a service industry that provides all the services to ensure that students can study effectively. 'In universities that have made systematic attempts to provide distance education programs, the quality of the distance learning experience, and thus the reputation of the university concerned, has to a considerable degree been a reflection of the special systems put in place to (a) admit and enrol students, (2) prepare study resources that afford parity of experience with on-campus modules by having quality front-ended through instructional design, (3) provide counselling and support, (4) facilitate the logistics of communication with remotely located students, (5) handle the traffic of assignments, and (6) afford opportunities for module and program evaluation, amongst other things'(King 2010).

This DL operational approach represents a cultural change of fairly momentous proportions for most universities and one many may find hard, if not impossible, to achieve. Rumble had suggested that CBUs that became DMUs were able to exploit marginal costs thereby developing courses more cheaply and also providing a more varied DL curriculum. He also suggested that the use of DL materials on campus would lower the cost of DMUs' campus-based teaching. This was the heart of the convergence thesis. However it is hard in the UK to find significant examples of this cross over even where universities are teaching the same programmes; and invariably, different academic staff are employed to develop and teach DL and campus based programmes.

The critical components of sustainable DL operational systems have been widely documented (Lentell). These components guide aspects of the DL set up and operation. Because DL involves a complex division of labour where the components have to be brought together systematically and then managed, this means DL has to be a whole-institution approach. This is unlike conventional teaching. As Sir John Daniel noted in a recent blog, commenting in the context of reported deteriorating standards in some DMUs, 'Good teachers can continue to teach well in the classrooms of a chaotic institution. However, if a distance-teaching institution takes its corporate eye off the ball, its systems can degenerate quickly. Before long, quality courseware and student support are only a distant memory. It seems trite to say that the answer lies in good leadership, but it is clear that ODL institutions need leaders who at least understand the nature of the organisations they are heading, as well as the clout to ensure that systems are maintained to a high standard (Daniel 2010).

Sir John Daniel is absolutely right - leadership is key. DL is different to conventional face-to-face provision. And if DL is going to have a rebirth, we need to revisit some basic principles of successful and sustainable DL that DL leaders promote and manage. Some of these principles include:

- **Values:** DL has historically been values led with its practitioners committed to the ideals of access to knowledge and the empowerment of individuals that follows from this. This ideal was written into the mandate of both DTUs and DMUs. For example, the UK OU was mandated to be open to all, and similarly, many DMU's in Australia were required to serve geographically isolated students. These values were widely shared by both academics and administrators and drove their DL planning and operational activities. Where there are no overarching ideals that frame DL activity, DL is in danger of being seen by administrators as the means to make money to support campus-based activities and by academics as the 'dumbing' down of the academy.

- **Learner centred:** In DL, students are separated geographically from their teachers. Knowing as much as possible about the learners, and developing learning materials and student support that takes account of this has been paramount. This is frequently the reverse of the provider-led approach of CBUs. DL students are more likely to be studying in isolation from others taking the same course. They are also most likely to be adults with work and family obligations, and thus have less free time to study than full-time undergraduates. Because of these factors, programmes of study and administrative support have to be carefully planned in advance and will most likely require the establishment of special systems and procedures.

- **Policy:** In most aspiring DMU's, policy is based on the needs of on-campus students and faculty, since DL is a small, or peripheral component of the academy's work, or may be a recent addition to the institution's programmes. Given the particular needs of DL students, this becomes very problematic when DL begins to grow. Policy issues cannot be ignored given the different nature of typical DL students. So systems and procedures will need to be different to, or become a subset of, the normal on-campus procedures. It must be recognised that procedures which apply to DL students will have to be sufficiently flexible in order that they can address the needs of DL students to fit study into their other lives.

- **Proactive Student Support:** As described earlier, DL students need well-organised support. A core part of this will entail the logistics of communication for students who may e.g. be studying in different time zones or in the evenings or at weekends. Usually this will be out-of-hours for the staff of the home university and thus raises the issue of how a student can talk to the university when they need help and guidance. DL students are easily discouraged by an apparent lack of response from the university or its staff to queries they have raised, or a failure to return feedback on assignments in a sufficiently timely fashion. The inability of CBUs to return assignments and give feedback promptly to on campus students is a source of the lowest scores on the student experience surveys, and thus does not bode well for CBUs becoming successful DMUs. Feedback is the key to learning and the personalising of DL. If it is not done well, it leads to high attrition and student complaints.

- **Instructional Design:** To ensure maximum effectiveness, efficiency, appropriateness and appeal of the learning experience, DL has traditionally put a high premium on instructional design. The provision of educational resources and the delivery of teaching are carefully planned to include ongoing administration, and the integration of student support, and other university services such as the library. Good instructional design is key to sustainability and the control of course costs. Moreover in a highly visible DL world not to control this aspect of university provision is a huge reputational risk. Poor quality is in the public domain. Ironically, the wide spread availability of learning technologies has led many to assume this function is no longer necessary – academics can do it, or the service can be downgraded to the work of instructional technologists – not instructional designers. The equivalent of this in print-based provision would be to assign course design and development to the printer. No serious academic institution would do this, but such is the allure, (or is it ignorance), surrounding learning technologies that many institutions are happy to do this.

In the UK, we may be entering a renaissance period for DL as governments and Universities come to appreciate its possibilities. DL is alluring because it offers expanded markets and the potential of increased income. However, the promise DL offers will not be realised if universities fail to appreciate that DL is not the same as face to face. It is unlike face to face because it is a very different way of delivering teaching. Teaching in DL is achieved through a complex production and operational

system. It is possible to have small departmental provision, but this is inherently risky, dependent as it is on a few dedicated staff (Bates 1995).Scaling up DL requires a whole-institution approach with the various operational areas integrated into a functioning whole. To make this work requires management and leadership. To the extent that institutional leaders understand this, resource it, and support it, it will be successful. But they will need to understand that if they want to go the DL route, it cannot just be an add-on to what is currently done face to face. DL requires a cultural shift and needs to be built on the recognised principles of successful DL. In a recent lecture, Ormond Simpson concluded that the various methods of supporting DL students were all more or less successful. But when student support failed, it was not the model or methods of support that was at issue, but the weaknesses of the institution that were exposed (Simpson).

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