Academic Strategies for Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Education all over the world is of paramount importance as it provides economies with opportunities for development and growth. Education is important for both – developed and developing economies – for the former to maintain their lead position and for the latter to ensure decent livelihood and utilization of natural resources. In such a situation, education needs to continuously upgrade itself to meet the ever changing needs of the economy, society and mankind. Hence, understanding education reviewing the developments, methods and standards are important if all stakeholders have to be satisfied. With globalization of education and the bent towards professional courses, Distance Education (DE) is established and is being more and more sought after. However, adopting academic strategies which will have mutual recognition across the world ensure holistic development and aid to maintain standards and quality of DE, is crucial need of the hour. The proposed paper aims to address these issues.

Keywords: Academic, Distance Education, Education, Knowledge, Learning, Quality, Standards, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) dates back to at least as early as 1728, when “an advertisement in the Boston gazette ‘Caleb Phillips, teacher of the new method of short hand’ was seeking students for lessons to be sent weekly. Modern distance education has been practiced at least since Isaac Pitman taught shorthand in Great Britain via correspondence in the 1840s. The development of the postal service in the 19th century led to the growth of commercial correspondence colleges with nation-wide reach. The University of London was the first university to offer distance learning degrees, establishing its external programme in 1858.

In Australia, the University of Queensland established its department of correspondence studies in 1911. Another pioneering institution was the University of South Africa, which has been offering correspondence education courses since 1946. In New Zealand, university-level distance education or extramural study began in 1960 at Massey University. The largest distance education university in the United Kingdom is the Open University founded in 1969. In Germany the FerUniversitat in Hagen was founded in 1974. There are now many similar institutions around the world, often with the name open university (in English or in the local language), and more than a dozen of those have grown to become ‘mega-universities,’ a term coined to denote institutions with more than 100,000 students.

DOI: 10.4018/jsita.2012070103
Charles Wedemeyer of the University of Wisconsin at Madison is considered the father of modern distance education in America. From 1964-1968 the Carnegie foundation funded Wedemeyer’s *articulated instructional media project* (aim) which brought in a variety of communications technologies aimed at providing learning to an off-campus population. Based on Moore’s recounting, the British being impressed imported these ideas and used them to create the first Open University, now called United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) to distinguish it from other open universities which have emerged. UKOU was established in the late 1960s and used television and radio as its primary delivery methodologies, thus placing it in the forefront of applying emerging technologies to learning. It is fair to say that all “open universities” use distance education technologies as delivery methodologies. There are many private and public, non-profit and for-profit institutions offering courses and degree programs through distance education. Levels of accreditation vary; some institutions offering distance education in the United States have received little outside oversight, and some may be fraudulent diploma mills. In many other jurisdictions, an institution may not use the term “university” without accreditation and authorization, normally by the national government. Online education is rapidly increasing among mainstream universities in the United States, where online doctoral programs have even developed at prestigious research institutions.

In the twentieth century, radio, television, and the internet have all been used to further distance education. Computers and the internet have made distance learning distribution easier and faster. Private, for-profit phoenix university, which is primarily an online university, now has two hundred thousand students and expects to serve five hundred thousand shortly, yet little, is known about student success or lack of success in such a fast-growing institution. In 2006 the Sloan consortium reported that more than 96 percent of the largest colleges and universities in the United States offered online courses and that almost 3.2 million U.S. students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2005 term. Perhaps one of the best known DE University in the Asian context is the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, India). In Ontario, Canada the ministry of training, colleges and universities established the eleklearnetwork.ca in 2007 to provide access to students in small and rural communities across Ontario who wanted to pursue college or university courses from their community by distance education. In the province of Manitoba, the department of education, citizenship and youth provides three options in distance education: independent study option, teacher mediated option and web-based course option.

The Independent Study Option (ISO) provides the opportunity and flexibility for both school-age and adult learners to study a wide range of compulsory optional print based distance education courses from grades 7 to 12. This form of distance education also provides students with support by email or phone. The independent study option also offers several courses in French. In the event that a student leaves the province on a temporary or permanent basis, the ISO also provides the opportunity for continuing the study of Manitoba curriculum en route to receiving a senior year’s graduation diploma.

Teacher Mediated Option (TMO) supports the delivery of distance learning courses that are scheduled within the school day and use a variety of technologies to assist students including: instruction twice a school cycle for 40 minutes per class by audio teleconference, recording of classes as required for use up to five days after the class has occurred, and corresponding with an instructor between classes by email or phone. These courses are only available to students attending school or an adult learning center. Web-bases course in Manitoba are available to schools wishing to deliver high school courses on the internet. Manitoba uses the Blackboard Learning System CE version 6.2. While being delivered through the internet, these courses are taught by a teacher who may be off-site. Assignments are submitted online.
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