Guest Editorial

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As former practitioners and advocates for classroom instruction seek to compare the relative advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face and online teaching by reporting on their primarily one-off experiences with developing and delivering online courses within a more traditional university culture, forays by more traditional universities into online education have begun to dominate the distance education and online literature.

No less challenging or instructive, however, is the fundamental transformation that seasoned practitioners and administrators of distance education find themselves facing as they endeavor to systematically enhance old models of distance education by taking advantage of the e-learning environment. Some would argue, as in fact I frequently do, that this challenge is of a similar magnitude to the one faced by new entrants into the non-classroom learning environment, for classroom-teaching converts to online learning are often much more in control of their teaching and learning environment than are their counterparts in single or dual mode distance teaching systems. In the first instance, the institution has traditionally invested primarily in classroom teachers who are relatively free to determine how to deliver their courses (whether in a face-to-face or distributed setting) at any given time. In contrast, while teachers in an organization where distance delivery is considered as a mainstream activity find themselves supported by institutional infrastructures and learning/teaching support functions, they are also constrained by these very same features which, in the past, complemented the individual academic's expertise and served to create a comprehensive high quality learning environment for distance learners.

The constraining infrastructure that supports quality traditional print-based distance education is not restricted to capital investments such as printing presses, television and radio production, course material warehouses, and various administrative and computing systems that facilitate mail and/or telephone interaction between (prospective) learners and their institution. Equally significant and daunting in the move to the online enhancement of distance education are the various previous institutional investments in human resources (academics, course designers, pedagogical support, non-academic support) and labor relations structures.

This special issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* had its genesis at the October 1999 meeting of the Standing Committee of Presidents (SCOP) of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) where senior academic leaders engaged in various professional development activities around a common theme: the identification and relevance of management and administrative issues faced by single and

dual mode distance education institutions as they sought to move to an online learning environment. One of the declared outcomes of these meetings was the need for all institutions to learn from each other and, with this goal in mind, Athabasca University committed to commissioning and publishing a collection of instructive case studies, a set of *best practices*, that would recount the challenges faced, and lessons learned, by single and dual mode traditional distance institutions that had already converted some of their programs to the online environment. The birth in 2000 of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* provided the opportunity to go one step further and to ensure that the commissioned case studies benefited from the blind review process.

Based on their representative nature and complementariness, seven submissions have been selected to exemplify the issues faced by significant providers of distance education as they have moved complete programs and support systems to online delivery. For ease of reading, for drawing comparisons, and with a view to facilitating the online forum that will accompany the appearance of this issue and the dissemination of the papers it contains, authors were directed to follow a common systems format[1] that sought to elucidate the interplay between each organization's internal culture, structures and processes, and the external social and environmental factors and demands within which the institution operated. This context in turn gives rise to a chronicle of critical events and an analysis of their intended, and unintended, consequences, thereby casting light on the program conversion's affect both on strategic planning and institutional management, and on the key course development and delivery systems.

Readers will learn from the experiences of institutions located in different geographic regions, where Internet access from home is probably the highest in the world, such as at the NKI Internet College (NKI) in Norway, to areas served by Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU), where online delivery is accessed primarily through local learning centers. Case studies, moreover, involve dedicated single mode institutions such as Athabasca University (AU) and IGNOU, examples of Australia's dual mode institutions such as Deakin University (DU) and the University of South Australia (UniSA), and two unique institutions in the United States, Empire State College (ESC) which functions as a dual mode adult education provider within the State University of New York, and Regents College (RC, and soon to be Excelsior College), an accredited distance education institution that even if it does not deliver courses at the undergraduate level, provides all student support, examination and administrative services commonly delivered by distance teaching universities.

While there are some notable (and explainable) exceptions, and in spite of significant differences in their mandates, institutional cultures, and the external environment in which they function, six of the seven studies nevertheless tell a rather consistent story about how these institutions approached the transformation of certain programs to the online environment, the challenges they

faced, the lessons learned, the relative educational benefits to learners of going online, and the range of issues that remain problematic in spite of the collective experience that has been gained to date. IGNOU, however, forms a case apart, both because of its dependence on local learning centers for accessing online course elements and because of the quasi absence of online interactivity either amongst students or between students and their instructors.

Whereas DU and UniSA assign particular emphasis to the need for a commitment from the top and strong academic leadership, all the case study authors gave considerable importance to the placing of online conversion commitments and strategies within a much broader institutional planning framework. For DU and UniSA, the online move represented one aspect of a rethought pedagogical model that was to influence both on-site and distance delivered learning processes. At AU, the commitment to e-learning as an alternative for those students who preferred this option was firmly entrenched in the 1996 Strategic University Plan, whereas at NKI online courses had benefited from an institutional commitment as far back as 1985 and have gone through three distinct generations since that time. IGNOU, though different in many regards from the other institutions, also designed its Virtual Campus Initiative in the context of a larger educational strategy that sought to respond, in collaboration with the Edexcel Foundation, to the National Task Force on IT and Software Development.

Though unashamedly very much influenced by the increasingly competitive distance education market, all institutions involved in this study rationalized their entry into e-learning on the grounds that they were seeking to improve accessibility and learning outcomes, even if in the case of IGNOU the reliance on Tele-Learning Centres where students were able to access the required technology meant that the online programs increased the gap between the more (urban) and less (rural) advantaged student populations and thus led to significant expressions of discontent by the latter. Because of their social missions and/or the fear of losing more traditional distance learner markets, however, the vast majority of the institutions chose to continue to provide dual or parallel delivery models, and will do so for some time yet.

Reliance on internal resource reallocation as opposed to external funding surfaces as an important issue when seeking to implant e-learning in the traditional distance education culture and thereby facilitate its sustainability. AU, UniSA, NKI and RC are reported as having been more successful in this regard than the others, even if DU seems well on its way to achieving this goal.

There appears to be at least two other essential ingredients to successfully transferring distance learning online. On the one hand, a commitment to paying great attention to, and integrating within mainstream systems, the online delivery of non-academic support services to students, and of general administration functions to staff; on the other hand, recognition of the importance of systematically developing institutional policies covering the complete range of academic and

non-academic services being provided to students and staff. From the case studies, it would appear that AU is the most advanced in this regard, though the importance of service in the RC context cannot be underrated. What differentiates AU, however, is its commitment to student and staff service standards, much as would one find in the private sector where customer satisfaction is so very important.

Except in the case of AU, another common condition of success is the institutional adoption of a single course development and delivery platform. NKI, UniSA, DU and ESC are firm believers in the need for a common platform with corresponding templates, both because this provides a model for faculty to adopt with relative ease, thereby facilitating the institutional commitment to training and support, and also because learners themselves are then only obliged to navigate a single platform. At UniSA, for example, the benefits attributed to the uniform platform are deemed more important than the restrictions that this places on the more innovative and computer-literate faculty, albeit that the institution recognizes the need to provide technologically advanced academics with more flexible platforms. In contrast, AU attributes much of its successful online conversion work to the institutional commitment to support different course development and delivery platforms: on the one hand, this has allowed the institution to maximize the creative energies of faculty who favored very different approaches; on the other hand, it has helped address an institutional objective of the online transition, namely, ensuring that students are skilled in the very tools that they will have to adopt in the ever changing, training-intensive, life-long learning workplace. Particularly in the case of students who opted to undertake a complete program with AU, there is no evidence to suggest that diverse approaches are presenting impediments to learners. As technology becomes more transparent and convergent, institutional decisions about single versus multiple platform issues are likely to diminish in importance.

What impact has the e-learning movement had on the traditional course development team? Unlike the other institutional case studies, UniSA reports that conversions have been fairly straightforward, though this is explained by the fact that this university has continued its traditional distance education approach of favoring a much more individual academic staff member-centered model of course development than have the others. Elsewhere (DU, AU, NKI, ESC), however, authors report not only that former course development roles (subject matter expert, instructional designer, editor, graphic designer, academic computing) are being deconstructed and reinvented, but that there is a blurring of boundaries between course development and course delivery systems (DU, AU). This results from the fact that the real pedagogical difference between predominantly print-based distance education and its current online manifestations resides not so much in the learning materials that students are provided with (though they are often enhanced with course relevant URLs), as with the increased opportunity for learning activities that can flow from online asynchronous and synchronous interaction both amongst students and between

the students and their tutor.

The blending of course team members' roles, and the overlap between course development and course delivery, give rise to new levels of complexity that impact the institution's ability to formalize effective academic quality control measures. AU and DU, for example, attach significant importance to this phenomenon and AU is concerned, primarily for quality assurance reasons, with the gradual (yet perhaps inevitable) slide from centralized to decentralized models of course development and delivery. While recognizing that theirs is a reactive rather than a preventative model of quality assurance, UniSA, on the other hand, has opted to enshrine its academic staff-centric model and to continue to hold each individual faculty member and their academic division responsible for the academic quality of the learning experience.

When it comes to quality, however, students are increasingly concerned with their total experience and seem to assign as much importance to non-academic support services as to academic support (AU). Since online approaches were often promoted by institutions as a means of increasing flexibility, learners are holding their institutions accountable for this. All institutions in the study also reported that the e-learning environment gives rise to increased service expectations by students, to the point where AU has found that student satisfaction is less linked to online learning opportunities than to overall flexibility and student service levels, both online and otherwise. Nowhere is this more evident than at RC where the core business is not the delivery of courses but rather the provision of non-course delivery specific academic support services. The critical importance of these services at RC, moreover, gave rise to significant outsourcing of key support functions (e.g., DistanceLearn, its electronic database of distance education courses, the Regents College Virtual Library, and Alumni Services website).

When it comes to the administrative challenges that all the institutions in question have had to face, there can be little doubt that the financing of online conversion and of continuing delivery looms large, and this for two reasons. First, and for the most part outside the control of the institutions, because generalized reductions in the public funding of institutions and diminishing access to private and charitable donations have forced educational organizations to become more self-reliant. This comes at a time when most of these institutions feel obliged to offer their courses and services both online and through more traditional distance education platforms. The second, and much more important reason, because online approaches are proving to be more, rather than less, expensive to operate. With the understandable exception of IGNOU, none of the institutions report the ability to lower delivery costs and to generate any savings that will help offset the higher development costs that they, for the most part, incur. Insofar as support services are concerned, RC for example reports having had to assign substantial financial increases in order to support the online functions that it has not outsourced.

General increases in the cost of online development and delivery are all the more noteworthy when one recognizes not only that the institutions are often also passing on to the learner communication and printing costs that the institution itself would have incurred in the past, but also that these institutions make use of lower end technology in order to reach students in their own homes, technology that supports much less expensive-to-develop courseware than the multimedia applications dependent on high bandwidth.

High learner expectations for increased access to academic staff (tutors, mentors, etc.) appears to rest at the heart of the delivery costing issue and of its reduced scalability when compared to print and telephone supported distance education (NKI, UniSA, AU, ESC), though some authors wonder about the pedagogical merits of some of the interaction (AU) and ways of balancing the learner's desire for flexibility and the need for collaborative learning in a social group (NKI). IGNOU's cost effectiveness, based on a model that does not support monitored online interactivity involving academics, supports this concern with the economic scalability of the proactive online tutorial model. Part of the answer no doubt lies in the development of online learning activities (either student-to-student, or with automatic feedback) that require little intervention by academics (ESC).

While emphasizing the need for continuous research into the pedagogy of e-learning, the case studies collectively shed light on the impact that the move towards online learning is having on the student's learning experience, both at a distance and in the classroom. Given that there may not yet be any financial incentive to warrant converting distance education programs to an online format, demonstrable indications of enhanced pedagogy and improved learning outcomes take on an added importance.

AU reports that while the important factors for online learning are much the same as for any teaching and learning system, the proper exploitation of information and communications online technology can result in improvements, not only over asynchronous print-based distance education models, but also over synchronous face-to-face and video-conferenced modes: in a comparative study involving its online MBA program and that of another well recognized university, students at AU reported engaging in more substantial interaction of an academic explanatory and cognitive nature than did their counterparts in the classroom and in the video-conferenced modes. Other institutions also identify: results of evaluations that are encouraging (DU); marginal improvements with online students more likely to complete their courses on time (ESC); the ability to provide better learning opportunities with the same, though not necessarily fewer, financial resources (UniSA); the design of academic content that is significantly better (IGNOU); and that the move to e-learning has resulted in a rethinking of the learning process itself, with positive implications not only for online distance learning, but also for its traditional face-to-face counterpart (DU).

Finally, it is clear from the ensuing case studies that one cannot understate the role that research and experimentation have yet to play in assuring the successful educational and financial implementation of online programs, particularly in not-for-profit public and private institutions and in disciplines where user-pay models are unrealistic. Nor is there any doubt that e-learning is here to stay, and that the challenges faced to date by distance learning organizations will pale in comparison to those that they will have to rise to in the very near future as sophisticated learners place ever increasing demands for higher end multimedia learning tools and a total quality learning experience. The case material presented in this issue of the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* not only reflects on recent past practices but, more importantly, sheds light on the key factors that institutions will have to address in the yet incomplete search for a scalable, pedagogically-driven e-learning model that anticipates different learning styles by increasingly demanding learners.

Endnotes

1. Developed by IRRODL Editor, Dr. Peter Cookson, whose assistance in this special issue was instrumental as was that of IRRODL's Managing Editor, Ms. Jan Thiessen.