# Can Distance Education be Mainstreamed?

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## Abstract

The term "mainstreaming" is often used to capture distance education's re-positioning within traditional universities. However, the results of a study of written distance education policies in four land grant universities challenge the implied widespread acceptance and integration of distance education into the educational mainstream. Furthermore, the results reveal major issues that compromise distance education's capacity to be mainstreamed into all relevant areas of the university system.

## Introduction

Distance education's relationship with traditional education has always been unclear; first it was put outside traditional education (Daniel, 1996), then it was described as being on the fringe of education, shunned by the academy (Holmberg, 1986; McIsaac, 1996; Jevons 1987; Tait 1999). Lately, based on its growing use in traditional universities, it is described in the literature and by practitioners as being "mainstreamed" (Thompson, 1999; Thompson and Irele 2003; Allen and Seaman, 2003). This paper, based on findings from Irele's (2002) study of four land grant universities' policies on distance education, makes the case that explaining the evolving relationship between distance and traditional education in terms of mainstreaming both over-states the situation and glosses over a number of serious issues that in fact threaten this process. After briefly reviewing the policies located in the study, the paper summarizes the findings and presents a prognosis for the mainstreaming of distance education within traditional universities.

### A Systems-based Comparison of Distance and Traditional Education

The appropriateness of the term mainstreaming to describe the relationship between distance and traditional education can be investigated through an examination of institutional policies. As more and more universities formulate policies to guide distance education practice, policies have become important lenses through which we can understand organizational goals and intent in this area. Irele's (2002) study of institutional distance education policies identified three core aspects of distance education mainstreaming: stakeholder acceptance of distance learning, convergence of core components of distance and traditional education, and the integration of distance education as a whole system into the more established traditional higher education system.

Early theorists' views of distance education as a distinct and separate form of education has largely been replaced by Daniel's (1996) more politically acceptable explanation that distance education is simply "a component of the wider enterprise of education and training" (p. 59). Nevertheless, those theorists' efforts to describe and capture the essence of this form of education continue to be important because they feed into ongoing "existential" questions about the nature of distance education and how it relates to traditional education. Moore and Kearsley (1996) provide further insight into such issues when they re-package the core distance education

characteristics identified by Keegan (1996)--the separation of teacher and learner, the use of technology to bridge communication and the presence of an institution—and re-present them from a systems' perspective, emphasizing the role of the institution.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) explain that the distance education system is not a series of separate entities, such as course content, and course design and development, but a system of interrelated components that function together under the auspices of "organizational and administrative arrangements" (p. 2). Earlier on, Holmberg (1989) had explained that systems may focus on either organizational-administrative or teaching and learning perspectives. Moore and Kearsley (1996) unbundled the issues involved to reveal a triple advantage to adopting a system's view: it provides a tool for recognizing many of the issues that separate distance education from conventional education, it distinguishes good distance education from bad, and applied at the level of the organization, state, or nation, enables the integration of distance resources as the development and operation of each component is integrated with, and supports, that of others. This systems-based relationship is important for the discussion of mainstreaming because it enables us to separate and examine the different aspects of distance education in relation to corresponding components of traditional education. This way we can identify what is, or is not, being mainstreamed and understand the factors that impact the process.

**Mainstreaming: A Multi-faceted Concept for Distance Education**

But what does the concept of mainstreaming comprise? OED Online (1989), highlighting its genesis in the field of special education, defines mainstreaming as the incorporation of a phenomenon into the mainstream activity. The underlying notion of mainstream is described elsewhere as participation in and/or ownership by its majority stakeholders of the principal, dominant or widely accepted group, movement or style (Flexner & Hauck, 1983; Procter, 1995).

Kavale (1979), focusing on the context of education, says that mainstreaming represents "an idea rather than a precisely delineated entity" (p.6). In distance education, mainstreaming is said to reflect the process of seamlessly integrating distance education into conventional education (American Council on Education, 1996; Berge & Schrum, 1998; Kearsley, 1998; Saba, 1998; Thompson, 1999).

A review of the literature reveals three dimensions to the mainstreaming of distance education. The first covers the achievement of parity of esteem between conventional and distance education (Jevons, 1987; Lewis, Farris, Snow & Levin, 1999). The second addresses the convergence of the means of instructional delivery, student groups, and types of institutions (Miller, 1990; Hall, 1994; Saba, 1998; Powell, McGuire, and Crawford, 1999; Thompson, 1999; Keegan, 2000). The third is the incorporation (or integration) of distance education's constituent elements--its philosophy of outreach, use of technologies, and its teaching strategies--into the main education system (Kearsley, 1998) and into existing institutional policy frameworks (Innovations in Distance Education Symposium, 1998). Mainstreaming ought then to be measured by the extent to which all three are demonstrated.

Peters (2002) provides instructive insight into the tensions that arise when distance education systems are introduced within traditional universities. He says,

They have to deal and come to terms with fixed academic structures and conventions which are normally resistant to change and restrict flexibility. They have to assert themselves when trying to innovate and modernize not only the learning-teaching system, but also the mission and the sense of direction of the institution in order to adapt it to the requirements of a rapidly changing

society (p. 146).

This comment underscores the structural differences between the two systems that are potentially problematic for the integration of distance education into the mainstream.

**The Role of Policies in Distance Education Mainstreaming**

Taken together, the definitions of mainstreaming suggest that it involves an intangible aspect of psychological acceptance, and a more tangible aspect of procedural changes in mainstream practices. The tangible aspect of procedures is often reflected in policies and resource allocations that enable effective integration into the mainstream of a different population of students, different teaching methods, and additional and/or new resources, based on appropriate strategic planning and organizational structure (Oblinger & Kidwell, 2000; Olcott & Wright, 1995; Pennsylvania State University, 1998). Quigley (cited in Lancaster , 1997) describes policies as decision-makers' tools for applying consistent solutions to recurring problems. Reccurring problems can be anticipated in the mainstreaming process and so policies play a pivotal role in establishing agreement among relevant members of an institution and guiding their behaviors so that they conform to the collective interests of the group.

Rogers (1995) says the institutionalization of a new idea depends on the development of rules and regulations that give structure to unstructured events and form a natural step in the adoption of an innovation. Thus stakeholders need appropriate policies to guide them as they adopt an innovation such as distance education.

However because they have both positive and negative implications for institutional action, policies are double-edged swords (Innovations in Distance Education, 1998): while they are requirements for the smooth operation of distance education within the traditional institution, they can also be disruptive to the existing system. As Berge and Schrum (1998) explain, "a bewildering number of policies and procedures form barriers to the implementation of distance education programs" (p.32). So, policies hold within them, the potential to either facilitate or hinder greater integration of distance education into traditional systems. Via institutional policies Irele's (2002) study identifies and analyzes factors that influence distance education's status within higher education.

**Methods**

*Site Selection*

Irele's (2002) study located, reviewed, and analyzed written distance education policies in four land grant universities.

Universities were eligible for inclusion in the study if they: 1) were land grant universities, 2) had over 15 years experience in distance education and/or five years in online education, 3) had written distance education policies in the public domain and 4) had one senior administrator directly involved in the distance education policy development process. The first three criteria enabled the researcher to establish a common base among the institutions. The fourth criterion was included to facilitate the researcher's access to policy documents and to obtain experts' insights into the mainstreaming process. Administrators were considered senior if they held, at least, the position of 'Director' or 'Assistant Dean', depending on the title used in the particular institution.

Following Bates' (2000) explanation that organizational structure is important for

institution-wide integration of distance learning, the researcher considered the universities' distance education organization on the basis of whether it was centralized or decentralized. Borrowing from Janda (1980) and Hanson (1998), centralization was defined as the location of decision-making authority in a single office within the organization. Decentralization was defined as the transfer of decision-making authority from supervisory to functional units, or between units. Based on a review of the literature the researcher determined the components of centralized distance education systems to include an institution-wide strategic plan incorporating distance education, a team-based approach to course design and development, a central office for recruiting and registering distance learners, central funding for distance education, and centralized marketing of distance learning courses and programs.

The researcher chose the four universities used in the study after searching university Web sites for their policies on distance education, the distance learning programs and courses they offered, and their processes for registering distance learners. Universities were eliminated if all of the above information could not be obtained and/or there was no senior administrator willing to participate in the study. Further, she found the universities suitable for inclusion because they could be paired as centralized and decentralized universities based on her prior knowledge of the institutions, information obtained from their Web sites, and initial statements from some of the administrators' (for example, one administrator explained that the university only had a few written policies due in part to its "very decentralized" organization).

Of the four universities chosen, two were located in the Midwest , the third in the Northeast and the fourth in the Southeast. The demographic data is provided in Table 1 below. Based on the attributes of centralized distance education institutions listed above, the two Midwestern universities were classified as decentralized and the other two as centralized universities.

**Table 1. Institutions' Demographic Data**

|  | University by Geographic location | Number of students | | Organizational category |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Total Enrollment | *Distance Students |  |
| 1 | Midwest | 40,000 | - | Decentralized |
| 2 | Midwest | 40,000 | 2,000 | Decentralized |
| 3 | Northeast | 80,000 | 4000 | Centralized |
| 4 | Southeast | 26,000 | 4,000 | Centralized |

Note. *Does not include independent learning students

*Collection and analysis of data*

The universities' policy documents were the main sources of data in this study, supplemented by administrators' perceptions of their universities' policy contexts. Two policy environments, strategic and regulatory, were identified. The strategic environment comprised the institutions' backgrounds in distance education, their organizational structures, and their strategic goals for distance education. The regulatory environment comprised the institutions' written policies and administrators' perceptions of the effect of organizational structures and written policies on the merge between the two educational systems. By separating the strategic and regulatory environments in this way, the researcher was able to establish a framework for analyzing the policies, which were then classified as either strategic or regulatory. The framework provided a mechanism for reviewing and comparing the two sets of policies and analyzing how well the strategic goals were aligned with written policy (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Conceptual Structure for Policy Analysis**

|  | Strategic Environment | Regulatory Environment |
|---|---|---|
| Context | Institutional backgrounds | Policy contexts |
| Sources | • Strategic plans<br>• Strategy-related documents | • Documented rules and regulations<br>• Administrators' perceptions |
| Analysis | Content review<br>Textual analysis | Content review<br>Textual analysis |

Both sets of policies were analyzed based on manifest and latent content analysis. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain, more than just a quantitative description of various forms of communication, manifest content analysis is a method for describing and understanding the history and context of a specific setting. In their study of institutional policies in Nebraska, King and his associates ( King, Nugent, Russel, Eich, & Lacy, 2000) used the term 'content review' and this was adopted by the researcher in her study. Irele's (2002) study presented relevant excerpts from the universities' strategic plans, reports, and regulatory policies to show the distribution of authority and responsibility across departments and central offices as well as the policy decisions themselves. Content review of the policies did not involve any interpretation of the text by the researcher.

Similarly, review of the administrators' perceptions did not involve further interpretation by the researcher. Using a self-developed questionnaire, the researcher asked the administrators

1. To rank the six attributes of centralized universities (mentioned earlier)
2. For their perceptions of the a) extent to which their universities demonstrated these attributes and b) category into which their university fitted (i.e., was it centralized or decentralized)
3. If their universities had written distance education policies covering the issues listed in King et al's (2000) three tier policy analysis framework (shown in Table 3).

4.  To provide information about where and/or from whom the documents could be obtained.
5.  To rank the need for policies on the distance education issues not covered by their institution's existing written policies.
6.  For their perceptions of the extent to which the existing policies helped to achieve their universities' strategic goals for distance education.
7.  For their perceptions of factors in their university that triggered the development of policy on each of the listed distance education issues..
8.  For their perceptions of factors in their university that constrained the development of policy on each of the listed distance education issues.
9.  For additional comments on the policies' impact (if any) on the mainstreaming of distance education in their institutions.

The analysis of latent content followed Fairclough's (1995a, 1995b) textual analysis methods. He describes textual analysis as having two components: first, linguistic analysis which relates to the forms of language and second, intertextual analysis, which links text to discourses used in the larger society of which text is a part.

The policies were thus analyzed based on what they said (their content) and how they said it (their language).

**Findings**

*Strategic Environment*

All four institutions had strategic plans or other documents that incorporated statements about the university's strategic goals for and/or approach to distance education. The fundamentals of the strategic goals were similar in that they all included the intent to increase access. However, there were differences in the way they approached the notion of access. For example, in one case, the discussion of access was limited to the expansion of geographical access. In another, the discussion focused on the introduction or expansion of professional development courses and programs for working professionals. The two remaining universities did not specify their approaches to increasing access and had no *a priori* focus on specific courses and programs.

A second strategic goal common to all the universities was the intent to increase revenue through distance education courses and programs. A third shared goal was the desire to enhance their positions as national and international leaders in distance learning by introducing and sustaining new approaches to learning via distance learning technologies and pedagogies.

Through latent content analysis, the researcher found that the language of the strategic documents sometimes supported the strategic mission and at other times was at odds with the stated goals. For example, the strategic goal of generating new revenue streams was very well supported by the policies. One institution's policy talked about "targeting high enrollment courses." In line with Palmer's (1986) assertion that the modal 'must' often denotes a strong directive that does not allow for the non-occurrence of the associated event, the researcher found that the universities' consistent use of 'must' in connection with tuition payment and course ownership pointed to a strong focus on the goal of increasing revenue. Furthermore, administrators' comments supported this finding; according to one administrator, policies were developed to facilitate separate tracking of new students from total student enrollments. In a third university, the use of on-campus facilities by distance learners was restricted to those who paid segregated fees in addition to tuition.

The policies did not all support the stated strategic goals. For example, despite its strategic goal to enhance program quality and enrich on-campus education via distance education, one institution's strategic policy mentioned "the potential for an erosion in educational quality due to the use of distance education instruction." The document went on to recommend that when faced with a choice, the university "must choose to maintain educational quality" thus communicating a negative message about the institution's commitment to distance education and an underlying belief that distance learning compromises educational quality. This finding was supported by a comment from the institution's administrator that there was a "lack of institutional commitment to (the) distance education learning process."

While content review of the policies suggested the strategic goal of extending access was supported in the written policies, latent content analysis revealed that access was however limited mostly to non-core programs, for example programs for "lifelong professional and personal development." Only one university had a policy that explicitly committed to increasing the number of online 'core' curricular courses. One administrator provided further insight regarding this finding in his comment that "the lack of institutional commitment puts distance programs in the position of being totally self-supporting." This, he said, creates confusion in the customer as to what the institution offers in distance education.

**Regulatory Environment**

The regulatory policies were organized according to King and his associates' (King et al., 2000) three-tier policy analysis framework (3-Tier PAF), adapted from Gellman-Danley and Fetzner's (1998) own framework. Using this framework, policy issues were grouped under three categories labelled "faculty," "students," and "management and organization." Policies located in the study spanned the three categories and covered the areas indicated by the administrators in the questionnaire. The general distribution of the policies is shown in Table 3.

*Faculty* . Policies found in the faculty category were about intellectual property and academic issues. Overall, the four universities' policies on intellectual property took the position that distance education instructional materials were "within the scope of employment," or "works for hire" owned by the university. The policies sometimes allowed financial benefit to be shared between the institution and the authors, and at one of the institutions, benefits were shared on an equal 50 percent/50 percent basis.

In the four institutions, in the area of course and program approvals, authority for program approval resided with faculty in the schools and colleges, with an intermediary distance education committee sometimes being introduced either in an advisory capacity or with approving authority.

Only one university had policies relating to non-faculty instructors, although it could not be ascertained whether two of the remaining three used external instructors. To some extent, this may be a moot point for the third, because the university does not distinguish between faculty teaching resident or online instruction.

**Table 3. Distribution of Regulatory Policies Based on 3-Tier PAF**

| Category | Total Number of Policies |
|---|---|
|  |  |

| | MidWest 1 | MidWest 2 | North-Eastern | South-Eastern |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Faculty**<br><br>Rewards (e.g., stipends, promotion and tenure merit increases, etc; Support (e.g., student help, technical assistance, training, etc.); Opportunities to learn about technology and new applications (e.g., release time, training, etc.) Intellectual property (e.g., ownership of materials, copyright, etc). | 2 | 1 | 7 | 11 |
| **Students/Participants;**<br><br>Support (e.g., access to technology, library resources, registration, advising, financial aid, etc); Requirements and records (e.g., residency requirements, acceptance of courses from other places, transfer of credit, continuing education, etc.). | 1 | 4 | 9 | 8 |
| **Management & Organization**<br><br>Tuition and fee structure; Funding formula; Collaboration (e.g., with other departments, units, institutions, consortia, intra-and inter-institutional, service areas, etc.); Resources (e.g., financial resources to support distance educaiton, equipment, new technologies, etc.); Curricular/individual courses (e.g., delivery modes, course/program selection, plans to develop, individual sequences, course developmenet, entire program delivery, interactivity requirements, test requirements, contact hour definitions, etc.) | 10 | 12 | 27 | 11 |

*Students*

All the universities had policies relating to student support. Although one of the decentralized universities had only one policy document in this category, its operations were covered by student-related policies from a sister institution (not shown in Table 3). While the universities addressed the expected issues of technology--its provision and support for distance learners--policies in this category focused primarily on providing resources similar to those

enjoyed by regular students. These concerns were addressed by all the institutions and the verbiage accompanying the policies usually explained the rationale behind them. In particular, policies stipulated that technical assistance be provided for students through help desk services and further spelled out students' eligibility to use library facilities. In addition, the universities had online guidelines for faculty and instructors to assist them in using technology and teaching at a distance. Two of the universities, appeared to focus more on ensuring consistency across the university, for example, in areas such as instruction, student support, and administration.

All four universities had policies regulating the participation of resident instruction students in programs or courses offered online, either in terms of the method of payment or by explicitly limiting the number of resident students who could participate in online sections. A major concern was that the enrollment ratio should favor the group of students bringing in new money. However, none of the universities had policies relating to admission requirements for distance learners although there was evidence (in the form of draft policy recommendations) that one of the universities was making efforts to institute policy in this area.

*Management and Organization*

Individual institutions had special areas of emphasis in line with their particular missions. For example, many of the policies were geared to helping the universities raise new money or keep old. Indeed, within the Management and Organization category, most of the policies were on cost and revenue-related issues, such as tuition rates, revenue sharing, and copyright. There were very few policies on inter-institutional collaboration; the only university that had such policies used them to promote consistent and efficient use of resources within the larger university system, particularly in the areas of program development and student support facilities.

One striking finding from the latent content analysis was that the tone of the regulatory policies, communicated for example in the use of modals, was directive and thus likely to be off-putting to the addressee(s). This interpretive finding was supported by one of the administrators who said that the copyright policy "was stated so baldly that it made faculty angry."

**Comparative Organizational Structures**

The administrators' responses to the questionnaire supported both the criteria for distinguishing between centralized and decentralized universities and the researcher's preliminary grouping of the four universities. The initial pairing of the universities was therefore maintained for continuing analysis.

One organizational attribute common to three of the four universities was a coordinating organization responsible for overseeing and making operational the funding policies and procedures for online courses and programs. Such policies were sometimes in the form of a cost-sharing formula, by which sponsoring colleges and schools earned a percentage of the revenue generated from online courses.

Overall, the centralized universities' policies covered more of the policy issues than did the decentralized universities' policies. The centralized universities were the only two with policies on faculty compensation, although the policies reflected different approaches to resolving this issue; in one case faculty members received compensatory allowances for participating in distance education, even though instructing via distance education was considered part of their on-load responsibilities; in the other institution, additional payment was made only when distance instruction was classified as off-load work. Faculty compensation seemed to be a

contentious issue in the former university because even though there was a policy in place, the matter continued to rank high as an area for future policy development. The two universities handle marketing functions from the special distance education offices.

The two decentralized universities were similar in that the decision to offer courses and programs, and responsibility for delivering and marketing them, rested primarily with the heads of departments and or deans of the sponsoring colleges or schools. Although colleges' administrative staff are typically not skilled at marketing, analysis of the policies' language showed that relief from marketing tasks was only available for courses with the potential to 'penetrate revenue' markets.

**Administrators' Perceptions**

Overall, the administrators' comments suggested that although the presence of written polices indicated awareness of issues important for the acceptance and integration of distance education into the universities' mainstream, it was not material in ensuring either acceptance or integration. One administrator noted that policies were very useful in the initial stages, when the university was adopting distance learning options. However, once they were formalized, the policies also hindered discussion on new issues as people would say, "we already have a policy on that." This generally ended further deliberation without leading to any action based on the policy. Further, although one of the administrators considered his institution's policies helpful in reducing tension between faculty and administration, the three other administrators felt their institutions' policies were not consistent or even at all useful since they could be, and often were, ignored or re-interpreted at will by those expected to implement them.

**Discussion**

The above findings are of significance for the discussion of distance education mainstreaming in the three aspects earlier identified: its acceptance by the majority stakeholders, the convergence of its systemic components with those of the traditional system, and its integration as a complete system into the mainstream.

*Acceptance of Distance Education*

The extent to which stakeholders have accepted and are comfortable with distance education can be somewhat assessed in terms of congruence between the intent of the policy as stated and its implementation. Despite the substantial number and scope of written policies developed in the four institutions, there is a pervading sense that they have been problematic to implement. The problem of policy implementation seems to center on faculty acceptance of policy decisions because faculty members are often the implementers of distance education policy as it relates to teaching. This was borne out in the study when for example, a policy on class size in one of the universities went mostly unheeded by faculty; not only were faculty reluctant to teach online courses they refused to teach large-sized classes, which they considered to compromise course quality. This could also be linked to workload issues as many studies have noted faculty concerns about the extra time required to teach online courses (Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz & Marx, 1999)

Differences in funding policies and in the interpretation of those polices further create suspicion between faculty and administrators and do nothing to ease distance education's entrance into the mainstream. Palloff and Pratt (2001) refer to a widening rift between faculty and administrators, ascribing it in part to faculty members' infrequent participation in the policy- and/or decision-making processes. Occasions of such differences in interpretation emerged in the study.

Whereas faculty expected and received payment for teaching resident instruction students enrolled in online course sessions, administrators claimed that the intent of the policy was to provide an incentive for faculty to teach additional students who were "attending" from a distance. These two implementation responses to the same policy reveal a lack of shared understanding of the rules and suggest a lack of trust between the two groups.

Mistrust between the two groups is again evidenced in the area of faculty rewards for participation in distance education. Many universities continue to operate without specific policies for recognizing online teaching in the promotion and tenure processes; of the four universities studied, only two had policies related to faculty rewards. The issue of faculty rewards has been identified in the literature as problematic for institutions wanting to mainstream distance education as faculty are reluctant to invest time in developing or teaching online classes if these are not explicitly factored into the promotion and tenure processes. Indeed faculty members and administrators' different perspectives on rewards is well noted in the literature. Dooley and Murphrey (2000) state that while administrators tend to focus on financial rewards, faculty members themselves put equal or more weight on release time, mini-grants and recognition in the promotion and tenure process. Offering further insight into this, Thompson (2003) records practitioners' observations that even when institutions are ready to compensate such efforts, there is often a lack of institutional expertise in developing guidelines for reviewing a faculty member's online contributions. These different reward paradigms stress the processes of meshing distance and traditional education in the same institution.

It appears that a veiled adversarial relationship exists between faculty and administrators. Jaffee (1998) draws attention to the special balance of power that exists between faculty and administrators in higher education, characterized by the system of faculty governance residing alongside a weak enforcement and discipline structure; he asserts that this effectively renders many administrative directives impotent. The different perspectives of the two groups seem to create a gulf that hinders appreciation and understanding of issues pertinent to each and thwarts required collaboration between them. Finance is a typical area that causes misunderstanding. On one hand, administrators feel keenly the pressures of reduced fiscal support and external expectations for increased accountability, while on the other, faculty members hold strong beliefs about what should be a university's main focus. Indeed, the policies located in the study did not resolve such divergence in mission prioritization.

Even though many faculty members are excited about the possibilities of technology, they want its use to have a primarily pedagogical and not financial value. Moreover, Jaffee (1998) cautions us not to confuse technology adoption with its acceptance as a legitimate means of instruction within a college's mission and curriculum. As present policies do not seem to adequately reflect faculty value systems, they are unlikely to fully satisfy either faculty or administrators, and this hurts the process of mainstreaming. If faculty members still on the whole find distance education unappealing or threatening, as Allen and Seaman also report (2003), it becomes difficult to claim that distance education has been mainstreamed in terms of its general acceptance by stakeholders and its attainment of parity of esteem within the university community. Present inability to resolve the impasse between faculty and administrators impacts adversely the rate at which distance education is accepted across the university.

*Convergence of Systemic Components*

Systemic components include students and curricula. Analysis of the policies located in the study suggests that they do not, overall, promote the convergence of these two components. With regard to students, the strategic policies showed that used to linking high enrollment numbers

with increased revenue, the universities engaged in distance education as a means of increasing the pool of paying students through the use of alternative instructional delivery systems. Distance education was thus seen as a means of appealing to new groups of learners who typically are demographically different from traditional resident instruction students, continue working while enrolled in programs and/or courses, and are more financially able to pay tuition. Thus the two groups of students remain separate.

The study also found that the universities' policies on admission requirements remained unchanged, and were not flexible enough to overcome logistical difficulties faced by distance learning students. While having the same policies may be considered a strategy in favor of mainstreaming, the reality is that non-differentiated admission policies do not take into consideration the known profiles and problems faced by distance learners. Noting this as a problem observed in his own university too, McLendon (1999) suggests that universities downplay the need for complete documentation of students' credentials in favor of students' demonstration of their ability to meet the expected progression and completion criteria. This way, distance learning students can be given more time to overcome logistical difficulties (such as traveling to the campus, etc.) while having ongoing access to study materials.

The strategic policies also revealed that the universities promoted distance education predominantly for professional and business-related courses and programs which they assessed to have the potential to attract this new group of paying students. This was especially important given the logistics of allocating financial aid to distance learners are not yet well established. The implication for mainstreaming distance learning is that this approach to curriculum development essentially creates different curricula for distance learning. It furthermore limits courses and programs for distance learning students by excluding many traditional (and less financially viable) programs and courses from the online portfolio. Thus we find that the two systems have parallel-running curricula.

Even when there are no explicit restrictions as to which courses and programs can be offered via distance learning, universities are under pressure to meet budgetary expectations, which encourages them to monitor participation in online courses. This is seen in policies meant to pave the way for new money from new enrollments by restricting the participation of resident students. For example, many branch campuses restrict their students' participation in online courses as a way of curtailing what they deem is encroachment on their turf. These policies deny interested resident instruction students access to online courses and slow down the rate at which distance education programs and courses are integrated in the university as a whole.

Paradoxically, despite the many tensions mentioned above, there is a light at the end of this particular tunnel. Considerations of finance and funding may fade away as blended learning, which combines the strategies of online teaching with those of the classroom, becomes more prevalent in universities. As faculty members become more comfortable with the online format, and routinely interchange and move between distance learning and classroom-based instructional strategies, we are likely to see greater convergence of students and curricula and thus an increased rate of mainstreaming from this perspective.

*Integrating the Distance Education System*

It is evident that distance education teaching and learning strategies can and do indeed co-exist well within the higher education system. What is less evident however, is the institutionalization of distance education as a system. We are again reminded of Jaffee's (1998) view that there is probably a conflation of interest in innovative teaching that relies on technology to mediate the

learning process, with interest in distance education as a legitimate way of learning and administering learning within a college's mission and curriculum. We have already noted earlier the existence of considerable psychological dissociation with distance education *per se* among faculty .

A second barrier to systemic integration of distance education relates to the difficulty of implementing the policies formulated to guide its practice. Distance education as a system seems to require tighter control, which is difficult to exercise in university environments. The discourse of the policies located in the study evoked performance in a more business-like environment and seemed to highlight distance education's straddling of the two worlds of business (with its focus on central control, and fiscal and operational efficiencies) and education (with its tradition of collegial decision making and general academic tolerance). However, this business-like approach in the education setting is not backed by the authority of a chief executive officer, a critical factor ensuring success in the true business environment. Without authority to enforce policy, seen in terms of rules and regulations, the operational aspects of distance education are difficult to manage, compromising successful achievement of goals.

The overwhelming evidence from the study is that, as they accommodate distance education, the universities are showing signs they consider it to be a foreign body within their systems. The costs of integrating distance education have proved unexpectedly high and suspiciously unaffordable. Thompson (2003) indicates that distance education's association with corporate management models makes it an unattractive innovation. As seen earlier in Jaffee's (1998) comment that university governance systems tend to neutralize administrative authority, it is difficult to resolve distance education management issues that center on accountability and the exercise of authority in the university setting,.

**Conclusion and Prognoses of the Mainstreaming of Distance Education**

Given the findings of the study, it seems likely that there will be convergence of the instructional components of distance education. However, this does not mean that distance education has achieved parity of esteem and acceptance by faculty or that it has been integrated as a system into traditional higher education. In these two respects, distance education and traditional education seem to continue to run along separate lines. Thus, frequent recourse to terms such as "mainstreaming" and "in the mainstream" overstates the relationship between traditional and distance education; it overstates the level of acceptance for distance education and glosses over serious underlying threats to its true integration as a system. Therefore, when discussing distance education mainstreaming, there needs to be greater specificity about which components of distance learning have been or are being integrated into the educational mainstream in order to accurately represent the relationship between the two forms of education in institutions of higher education.

Perhaps the early debates on the nature of distance education could be revived in order to explore distance education's organizational exigencies and how these compare with those of traditional education. These new debates will not be concerned with making a case for distance education as a worthwhile form of education, but instead will focus on its implementation, administration, and governance to determine whether these are so distinct as to make distance education a special form of education that fares better on its own. Is Perry (as cited in Rumble, 1992) still right in his view that the only viable solution is a dedicated distance education institution with its own rules and regulations? Will students be better served in single mode institutions that can more easily focus on and address their particular needs and wants? Can pragmatic and practical approaches co-reside with entrenched higher education values and traditions, especially as valued by faculty?

Or is instruction the only component of distance education, especially its online version that, truly, can be mainstreamed within traditional universities? These are important areas of investigation whose findings can help decision-makers understand and anticipate the complexities inherent in efforts to integrate distance education within institutions with firmly entrenched traditional values and practices.

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