

POSTSECONDARY DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MEXICO AND WORLDWIDE Issues and Considerations

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Postsecondary distance education has attracted increasing attention in recent years, an understandable change when one considers that innovative approaches to distance education have offered opportunities to overcome some of the key challenges in traditional “brick and mortar” education. Nonetheless, there are a plethora of issues that must be considered by postsecondary distance education institutions negotiating the delicate balance between educational access, efficiency, and quality. This article, the result of an interview with Professor Manuel Moreno (Rector of the University of Guadalajara’s Virtual University System, and a leader in distance education in Mexico and beyond), highlights some of the key trends and issues faced in strategic planning, visioning, and leadership for postsecondary distance education initiatives. The work pays particular attention to the following themes: quality assurance; accreditation; globalization and transnationalism; and technological innovation.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Distance Education in Mexico

Distance education in Mexico can be traced back almost a century, with its earliest incarnation coming in the form of independent study materials distributed to residential locations (Moreno, 2004). Since that time, distance education has dramatically grown, with large-scale distance education programs being offered by several of Mexico’s largest and

most respected postsecondary institutions. Over the last few decades, interest in distance education in Mexico has been spurred by technological advancements enabling improvements in distance teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, distance education in Mexico is seen as a mechanism by which the country can address important economic and human development strategic priorities. Transitioning into the knowledge society, and recognizing the importance of lifelong learning, policymakers and planners realize that dis-

tance education may offer advantages over the traditional classroom setting, including increased access to education, more flexible models of learning, and more (World Bank, 2005).

The Mexican government, collaborating with the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) and the states' secretaries of education, is promoting distance education teacher training initiatives through education reform passed in 2007 (*la Reforma Integral de la Educación Media Superior*). The government estimates that it will have trained some 240,000 teachers by the end of 2012 (SEP, 2011).

Mexico is engaged in important efforts to establish guidelines for regulating distance education projects and initiatives. These national level initiatives are in response to several key systemic issues facing distance education in the nation: an incomplete understanding of the scope and varied selection of distance learning in Mexico; insufficient documentation and validation of distance education trends and areas of interest; and lack of clarity of the social impact of distance education institutions in Mexico. In sum, there is a need in Mexico for improved understanding of where distance education is headed, the extent to which current initiatives align with strategic national priorities, the direction of new initiatives, and how advanced technologies will impact the field (Aretio Garcia, Ruiz, Quintanal, Miriam, & Mary, 2009).

University of Guadalajara's Virtual University System

The University of Guadalajara has played a leadership role in augmenting the postsecondary student access to distance education in Mexico. Founded in 1792, it is the second largest university in Mexico, with an enrollment of almost 230,000 students (Cortés, 2012). The University of Guadalajara is structured through a network comprised of 15 university centers, seven around metropolitan Guadalajara, and eight in areas outside of the Guadala-

jara region. The regional university centers are strategically distributed throughout the state of Jalisco.

The university has several different campuses, one being the *Sistema de Universidad Virtual* (the *Virtual University System, or VUS*). The Virtual University System vision statement indicates that by 2030, the System will be the "University for all by having attained global reach, and establishing itself as a leader in (among others) "the development of innovative approaches to creating, sharing, and applying knowledge" (Sistema de Universidad Virtual, n.d., para. 1). Its key responsibilities include (a) strengthening open and distance education and (b) expanding educational coverage, to reach traditionally underserved communities. The VUS is charged with managing and developing postsecondary distance education programs, using information and communication technologies (Sistema de Universidad Virtual, 2005). The VUS programs enroll some 4,800 students.

About the Expert: Professor Manuel Moreno

Professor Manuel Moreno is the founder of the University de Guadalajara's Virtual University System, and also serves as the institution's rector. He is also the network coordinator for la *Red de Centros Comunitarios en Línea* in Jalisco, Mexico. Until 2012, Professor Moreno served as president of the *Campus Virtual Latinoamericano* (Latin American Virtual Campus).

Over the last 2 decades Professor Moreno has served the distance education community through involvement in a wide range of activities. In addition to teaching and maintaining an active scholarly record focused on distance education (Professor Moreno is the author of 13 books), he has provided expert insight on distance education related projects in several countries. He has played a decisive role in the planning and organizing of 17 international gatherings focused on distance education (Sistema de Universidad Virtual, 2010).

Professor Moreno has a well-established reputation throughout Mexico and Latin America as a leader in educational innovation and distance education. His contributions to the field have been recognized with honors and special appointments, including an Honorary Doctorate from the Universidad Católica Los Ángeles (Chimbote, Peru), an official recognition for his role in promoting distance education in Mexico by ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education), and appointment as Ambassador of the Open University of Venezuela (Sistema de Universidad Virtual, 2010).

Professor Moreno's professional trajectory has been rich and diverse, yet a common theme underlying his work is a commitment to teaching and learning. He has dedicated significant energy throughout his career to teaching and teacher professional development. Indeed, he is known to emphasize the importance that he assigns to his role as both a teacher and a learner in the varied functions he fulfills, including professional functions, friendships, and family roles (Sistema de Universidad Virtual, 2010).

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: APPLIED LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education must bring together the conditions of excellence similar to those offered in traditional education. Some argue that distance education lacks applied practice opportunities, causing it to be viewed as second-rate education.

For Moreno, there is no basis for any claims that allege that distance education cannot offer rich, quality, and applied learning experiences equal to those in the traditional classroom. In principle, he believes any modality has the same potential for delivering effective applied learning experiences, and success will depend on the learning design and the specific instructional strategies which are adopted to reinforce student understanding of the relationship

between theory and application. Moreno points to some of the unique attributes of virtual learning environments (e.g., flexibility, pervasiveness, personalization, and collaboration) making them especially conducive to reinforcing the application of theory to practice. The Virtual University System has, for example, *Project Portfolio*, an institutional program through which students can complete their internship or practicum in various areas of society including business, community or government settings. Moreno contends that, with the use of a virtual learning environment such as *Project Portfolio*, there may in fact be less distance between the "real world" and the "learning environment" that would otherwise be the case for a traditional classroom setting. Fundamentally, quality assurance through effective design, implementation and evaluation of this remains the cornerstone of distance education.

Globally, society is characterized by ever-greater levels of complexity and diversity, in which education has come to offer meaningful solutions, including efficient and timely answers to new and unique challenges. Quality distance education can play a unique role in this broader landscape. It is therefore no surprise that a significant amount of attention has been given to designing and validating models for quality distance education. For example, the *Concord Consortium*, a nonprofit educational research organization focused on the application of technology to learning developed the *eLearning Model* (2002). The model includes asynchronous collaboration, explicit schedules, expert facilitation, inquiry pedagogy, community building, limited enrollment, high-quality materials, purposeful virtual spaces, and ongoing assessment. Much of the research undertaken by the Concord Consortium is directed at instructional design approaches that promote research and deep reflection, where the theoretical and practical aspects of the learning process converge (Concord Consortium, 2002). This is consistent with much of the scholarly writing on instructional design practices in distance education, which is focused specifically on quality design

elements that promote higher order thinking skills (Smith, 2006).

***ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES
IN DISTANCE EDUCATION;
IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESS
AND QUALITY***

Early on, distance education was a source of hope for many, bringing forward new paradigms of teaching and learning based on independence, self-regulation, and constructivist learning theories. Regrettably, the reliance on communication technologies has caused many to view distance education as elitist, due primarily to the relatively low penetration rates of telecommunications technologies in countries such as Mexico.

Moreno argues that distance education has always been associated with the technologies of its day, and that distance education's origins and basic requirements have always been mediated by some form of technology, with the goal being to overcome the distance between the different actors in the system. The new technologies are revolutionizing the systems for interaction between teachers, students, and instructional content, and these supporting technologies help us better understand distance education modality.

The process of evolution in distance education delivery systems has been categorized in three main stages (Beaudoin, 2003): correspondence education, technology assisted education and, finally and more recently, networked education. Delivery systems categorized in all three phases remain present today. However with the increased prevalence of delivery systems classified as network-enabled (the third stage), Beaudoin is among those to observe "we are now witnessing dramatic changes in how instruction is designed and delivered across time and space" (para. 1.).

For Professor Moreno, there is no reason to consider distance education as different from any other modality. While the strategies and technologies can potentially contribute significantly to factors such as the democratization of

education, the self-regulation of learning, and innovative practices, in reality these factors also depend on educational policies and social focus. As such, distance education can be just as "elitist," "conservative," "democratic," or "liberating" as can be traditional education. The reality is that today we see examples of distance education programs using the most advanced technologies, personalized learning experiences, and extensive attention to quality. These programs often target the socially privileged. On the other hand, we also see distance programs that are low in quality, with precarious technological supports. These programs often target the historically marginalized sectors. Today's challenge is to provide education programs that can be characterized both by equitable access and excellent quality for all learners.

Finally, it is worth remembering that post-secondary education—whether at a distance, or in the traditional classroom—is being irreversibly impacted by the ubiquitous and pervasive influence of communication technologies on today's society. These technologies rapidly impact every facet of our lives and produce demand for specialized new knowledge and skills. Both brick and mortar and distance universities are responding to these demands, giving due consideration to the role of information and communication technologies, as well as the impact such technologies can have on the development of cognitive structures (De Moya, Hernandez, Hernandez, & Cozar, 2011).

***ACCREDITATION
AND QUALITY ASSURANCE***

Many higher education institutions have focused on increasing recognition for their educational programs, often including formal accreditation. Moreno posits that quality of educational programs is one of the current issues on the agenda of most higher education institutions. In the case of distance education, validating quality through accreditation is often considered a necessity. The pursuit of quality has also prompted many institutions to

give serious consideration to both international agencies and intermediaries (Korniejczuk, n.d.).

For Moreno the quality of education is not dependent on the modality, but on the quality of living educational processes, and these depend fundamentally on the quality of the academic staff. In the various educational modalities what tends to vary are the spatial, temporal, and organizational circumstances in which the essential educational processes take place. As Moreno points out, it is within these *educational processes* that the quality resides which we seek to preserve, not so much the *circumstances* in which they take place. He contends, therefore, that all educational variations should be evaluated against the same standards of quality, only acknowledging that they are carried out in different situations and circumstances.

In spite of extensive literature demonstrating the effectiveness of distance education, particularly at the postsecondary level, it remains important for distance institutions to build the case for credibility, so that students are reassured that their earned degrees and diplomas are backed by meaningful accreditation. Educational institutions seek to publicly back the quality of their academic offerings. It is therefore no coincidence that one of the most important areas of engagement of the Inter-American Distance Education Consortium (CREAD) has been its "Standards of Quality" for nontraditional educational modalities. CREAD is a nonprofit organization with the objective of promoting quality distance education through interinstitutional collaboration across the Americas (CREAD, 2010). [More information about CREAD's (<http://www.cread.org/>) Standards of Quality can be found in Spanish at the CALED website (<http://www.caled-ead.org/>). The website includes reading materials on the fundamentals of distance education, developing instructional materials for distance education, excellence in distance teaching, implementing distance education systems, and evaluating quality of distance education.]

According to Stella and Gnanam (2004), similar accreditation and quality assurance initiatives have been implemented in other countries. In the United States, for example, the Institute of Education Policy has developed a framework consisting of 24 benchmarks covering seven areas considered essential to ensure excellence in distance education. In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency has published a new guide to distance learning in higher education.

TRANSNATIONALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

As distance education is increasingly recognized as a valid modality for delivering quality instruction (and with the backing of accreditation organizations), higher education institutions face pressure to enhance access to their distance programs. Such pressures are especially evident in Mexico, a country with a population of mostly young people. Almost 28% of the population is under the age of 15, and the country has a positive growth rate (CIA World Fact Book, 2012). The youth in Mexico express a strong demand for postsecondary professional training and certifications at the postsecondary level.

One of the issues reflected in the current dialogue and agenda in distance education worldwide is the tension between globalization and contextualization. For example, UNESCO convened the Global Forum on International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, a forum that established a platform for dialogue around international issues facing higher education and focused on the development of an international policy framework on the impact of globalization on higher education (Hope, 2005).

On the transnationalization of distance education, Moreno noted that our understanding of the evolution of society is foundational to appreciating contemporary distance education

approaches. Prior to the knowledge society, approaches to distance education were focused on needs within individual countries. Working within the country, distance education tackled a broad panorama of issues, and could drill down within a specific context. Today's distance education must transcend national boundaries. This reality is exemplified through a system like VUS, where 24 countries were represented among enrolled students in the 2012-2013 academic year. Moreno emphasizes the importance of truly transcending national borders. Globalization should not, in his view, emerge from homogenous and decontextualized transnational models. Instead, globalization should arise as a result of local projects which, linked with other initiatives, promote the construction of alliances that go beyond national borders.

The foundation of learning is social. Peoples of different ethnicities, regions, and nationalities must learn to live together. Not only must we share the world with those who share our ethnic origin, but we must also embrace diversity, respecting differences in gender, religion, sexual orientation, learning styles, interests, and so on.

According to Olive (1999), the impact of globalization on culture is not fully understood. One position is that globalization will risk eliminating cultural diversity, being a process toward the construction of a global society consisting of a single culture. An alternate position posits that globalization yields a global society in which all cultures meaningfully contribute to enriching a single society, while at the same time benefit from the exchange and cooperation of other cultures (Olive, 1999).

One option proposed by Moreno (2004) is building an alternative global community, unified by a core commitment to collaboration. For Moreno, a form of globalization driven by a common commitment to constructive collaborative can be an alternative to more prevalent forms of globalization, which are typically associated with a tendency toward cultural

homogenization and inequity on matters of social justice.

Moreno warns of the dangers associated with advancing the trend of a globalization that is vertical, massive, and homogenizing. From his vantage point, the best option is building a global community that draws from the identities of each person and each social group, thereby constructing a global entity in which diversity is respected and enjoyed.

The University of Guadalajara is engaged in several interesting distance education initiatives that embody the kinds of global community to which Moreno refers. The goal of such initiatives is to emphasize the communal, promote collaboration, and recognize the unique contributions of the individual partners. One such initiative is the *Learning and Academic Services Community* (CASA). This virtual learning community initiative targets Jalisco (Mexico), a region challenged in terms of educational access and quality. CASA prepares students for participating constructively in a globalized world. It employs alternative strategies to increase and diversify postsecondary learning opportunities, particularly for traditionally underserved audiences (e.g., those for whom personal circumstances, age, or prior education limit access to higher education through more traditional routes). [More information about the CASA initiative can be found at: http://www.udgvirtual.udg.mx/casa_universitaria/]

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Throughout the world, and indeed in Mexico, postsecondary distance programs face some unique challenges. In concluding this article we now identify some of the most relevant challenges emerging from (a) our discussion with Professor Moreno, and (b) our review of literature based relevant to the themes discussed in the interview. The challenges can be listed as:

- Institutions with lengthy histories of traditional education may have difficulty integrating quality and innovative distance education programs within existing structures.
- At the national level, significant challenges are posed with criteria for determining (a) which distance education programs receive funding, and (b) how distance education program will be monitored. Monitoring and evaluation criteria may be biased toward more traditional modalities (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Further, competition and diversity among distance education institutions are unparalleled. Leadership strategies are more consequential than ever before.
- Leadership strategies must adapt not only to the institution, but also to the social and cultural context in which the institution exists. Higher education is exposing itself to an increasingly competitive market, in which the quality of the universities is an issue of renewed interest, a product of competition. Higher education institutions should be the primary entities present in the debate about evaluation and accreditation.
- Governments and educational institutions should be responsible for monitoring the process of transnationalization of education, thus avoiding what Moreno referred to as “homogenizing and decontextualizing” transnational approaches. Internationalization can be understood as a way in which a country reacts to the phenomenon of globalization, while respecting the individuality of the nation.
- Technology will continue to play a key role in the delivery of distance education. Through more or less permanent adoption of technologies postsecondary educational institutions can establish the mechanisms by which they can fully achieve the potential of technology, thereby achieving the dream to expand access, enhance quality, reduce cost, and increase the profitability (Bates, 2001).

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