

THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA Past, Present, Future

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Australia's large size and scattered population made it a prime location for the development of correspondence education in the 1920s, and the country is still in the forefront of distance education. This article is based on an extensive interview with Terry Evans, professor at Deakin University in Australia, who reflects on the history of distance education, its current situation, and also shares his thoughts about the future of distance education in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Since the formation of its constitution in 1901, Australia has grown to be the 53rd largest country in the world, with over 22 million people spread out over 4 million sq. km (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). Its diffused population made it a prime location for the development of distance and correspondence education. Initiated by the state of Victoria in 1909 at the secondary level, distance learning began to spread throughout the rest of Australia (Stacey, 2005). Distance education contin-

ued to flourish and in 2002 the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning was formed to support distance and e-Learning opportunities in most universities in Australia and New Zealand.

Australia Country Information

Population: 22 million
Urban population: 89%
Life expectancy: 81.9 years
Literacy rate: 99%
Internet users: > 17 million

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (2012).

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Evans and Smith (2011) evaluated the rise and fall of distance education in Australia and revealed its change of focus, as it turned from providing a service to a population in need to becoming more of an educational enterprise led by economic incentives. We sought Terry Evans's expertise to precisely explore the evolution of distance education in Australia; to understand how the growth of online media has redefined it, and to evaluate how this evolution may have affected distance education nationally and globally.

Evans supervises doctoral candidates at Deakin University. He was one of the founding directors of the master's of distance education program in collaboration with the University of South Australia in the late 1980s (Deakin University, n.d.). He has authored *Understanding Learners in Open and Distance Education* (1994) and *A Gender Agenda* (1988), and coedited other books such as *International Handbook of Distance Education* (2008) and *Shifting Borders: Globalisation, Localisation and Open and Distance Education* (1997). His extensive published research spans the range from primary to doctoral education with a focus on distance education, educational technology, and online education.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA, ENGLAND, AND THE UNITED STATES

Since the 1920s, Australia has played an important role in the development of distance education, or as it was then called, correspondence education, as a tool to serve the educational needs of people mainly in rural areas. When state governments were mandated to provide an education to all children, correspondence education was the logical response when geographical location or family status would not allow them to attend an on-site school. At the same time, some of the universities developed distance education to help teachers enhance their qualifications (Evans,

Open Universities Worldwide

(estimated unconfirmed enrollments)

Indira Gandhi National Open University	3.6 million (public—India)
Islamic Azad University	1.9 million students (private—Iran)
Allama Iqbal Open University	1.2 million (public—Pakistan)
Open University United Kingdom	250,000 (public—UK)
UNISA	250,000 (public—South Africa)

Sources: Wikipedia (2012); Public Islamic Azad University.

1995). Networking and the development of higher distance education programs may even have inspired the development of the Open University in the United Kingdom (OU.UK) in 1968. “Unlike most of these pioneering programs, the OU.UK was a single-purpose institution devoted exclusively to educating part-time students whose circumstances or desires meant that they could not attend campus-based program” (Evans & Nation, 2003, p. 789).

It is interesting to note that, unlike many neighboring countries such as Indonesia, India, and Malaysia, Australia does not have a dedicated distance education university. The Open Universities Australia operates by offering programs from 20 different universities across Australia (Open Universities Australia, n.d.).

Historically, there are similarities between Australia and the United States in their need to develop distance education: both strove to assist the part of the population not being served by traditional on-site education. Initially in Australia, education was the responsibility of the government; as a consequence the development of distance education was not a response to market factors. However, there were schools that trained people for job-specific skills. After World War II, and the return of servicemen, distance education became popular at the university level for people who wanted to achieve professional qualifications. Existing campus courses were then “externalized” and study materials were specifically

written for correspondence education. From a broadcasting standpoint, Australia's size worked against its distance education programs as a live broadcast was viewed in five different time zones. Furthermore, the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation could not reach many remote areas. Later on, these programs pioneered the use of video- and audiocassettes. This allowed for equal accessibility to higher education, regardless of gender or location.

Since university professors developed courses both for face-to-face and distance learning, distance education benefited from government funding and received the same infrastructure that would support on-campus students. Such a dual-mode approach to distance education is what contributed to assure quality of distance learning in Australia (King, 2010).

In comparison, the United States also relied on correspondence distance education. It is interesting to note that in 1924, four times as many people were enrolled in proprietary correspondence than in all resident colleges, universities, and professional schools (Noffsinger, 1926). One may recall that this was the time that university correspondence education took off in Australia. In the 1960s, broadcasted educational programs were developed as a result of the social rights debate, which brought forward the need to reach inner city children. This led to the creation of the Public Broadcasting Services and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Today, with the rising cost of education (10% to 15% a year), distance education, mostly via online media, can provide new ways of delivering instruction (Saba, 2011).

When asked about the current trend in the United States to see distance education as a business venture with profit making goals, Evans acknowledged similar developments in Australia where there are also tensions in the relationship between Australia's state programs and educational business ventures. The OU.UK is an example of how a state's involvement can produce quality education

while counteracting the population's skepticism about online learning. However, distance education driven by the state does not always guarantee a high quality program. The same is true for the business sector. A solid business model, brand concept, and reputation, as well as quality of service are the keys to having a successful business in education.

Such tensions have also existed in the United States. Edelson and Pittman (2001) relate how two types of correspondence education developed as rivals; one being provided by state and not-for-profit universities while the other originated from commercial schools whose goal was mainly to produce a profit. As a result, the quality of these schools was deemed "from very good to fraudulent" (p. 5).

Evans also emphasized that assessment is a crucial component of distance education. A good course requires rigorous assessment to ascertain the quality of students' learning. As the reputation of the school rises, the assessment becomes more meaningful to the outside world. Reputation, assessment, and instructional support are the essential elements for an institution to maintain its quality. Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) concurred that assessment and feedback are essential components in higher education, especially for retention of first year students and in the development of self-directed learners. They argue that since retention has not been, so far, a core issue of distance education providers such as the OU.UK, current assessment and feedback must be redefined. Terms like retention, dropout, and noncompleters have traditionally been inconsistently and incorrectly used.

Evans does not foresee a single approach to distance education in the future. This is because of the many different ways that distance education can be utilized. Many large companies use online training to ensure that their employees are familiar with the law and its implications in the workplace. Another possibility would be to offer more skills retooling. Evans recognized that while large organizations will most likely rely heavily on online

courses, smaller ones may find it more practical to continue with the face-to-face format and speculated that in the future, online courses will be a powerful means to distribute more routine content.

GLOBALIZATION AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Evans and Pauling (2011) concluded that distance education institutions “stand a chance” against the growing wave of alternate learning avenues and media sources as long as they, “adapt to the ... changing technology ... diversity and capacity of digital learners.” (p. 216). Pauling (Evans & Pauling, 2011) developed theories about the ways education is moving in conjunction with the development of broadcast media, TV in particular, in Australia and New Zealand. Pauling saw a correlation between the stagnation of distance education and the advancement of media organizations over the last 30-40 years. While distance education stayed stagnant in its delivery, using traditional print media and radio for distribution, new broadcast media gained broad popularity.

The popularity of open universities demonstrates that distance education is moving toward an open format catering primarily to digital learners. Yet, the digital divide still exists, even at the regional level. Although the rate of households with computers and broadband access is constantly increasing in developing countries, other factors such as people skills, supportive policies, or service affordability still impose a significant gap.

Evans pointed out the pace and the compulsion the developed world established to progress, leaving the developing world further and further behind (Evans, 2003). Fortunately, in numerous developing countries, the broadband penetration rate is closing in rapidly on the developed world. However, in too many parts of the world, economically challenged countries are lagging behind the fast paced global digital development. Benat Bilbao-Osorio, associate director of the World Economic

Forum’s Center for Global Competitiveness and Performance, recently commented that, “Despite all the efforts that we have seen in the past, the digital divide still exists between developing countries and developed countries” (“Digital Divide,” 2012).

Developed nations such as Australia have their issues too. The Australian government is aware of the need to offer higher education to all of citizens in order to avoid a social divide, especially between rural and urban areas. The development of open and distance education, providing more possibilities with the addition of Web 2.0 technologies, would allow more qualified learners to have access to a higher education. Yet, given the high competition between Australian universities to enroll students into face-to-face programs, many institutions are slow to embrace the need to offer open and distance education, as they do not see it as a viable business model. More concerted efforts have to be made by politicians and educators alike to stress and strengthen the development of technology-based higher education to overcome the social divide on the continent and to provide equal opportunities to all Australians (Bossu, Bull, & Brown, 2012).

However, Australia is seeing progress. A digital divide that used to exist in Australia is a generational one. Having grown up in the digital age, the younger generation has been able to take full advantage of new media and become natively digitally literate learners. In the past retirees were often lacking in computer skills. Today, Australian retirees are leaving the workplace with well-developed IT skills that allow them to stay connected and would serve them well if they chose to pursue online distance education. Online courses should prove popular with this demographic.

CONCLUSION

Based on the interview with Evans and our study of the literature, we can conclude that the development of distance education in Australia has responded to the nation’s needs and con-

tributed to the worldwide discussion on providing remote learning opportunities. To stay relevant and to secure its traditional position in leading distance education in the South Pacific, Australia will need to tend to two major issues. First, to combine efforts in increasing the role of open and distance education, policies, and infrastructures will need to be developed to support this endeavor, and higher education institutions need to collaborate to further open distance education opportunities to better serve their community rather than competing for economic incentives (Busso, Bull, & Brown, 2012). Second, it is our conclusion that, although individual initiatives such as the Melbourne model have responded to the internationalization of higher education, greater support and incentives are needed centrally from the Australian government for distance educational programs to remain competitive with other leading countries in the South Pacific which propose strong programs such as the Open University Malaysia or the Open University of Hong Kong.

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