

QUEBEC'S TÉLÉ-UNIVERSITÉ

A Long Way to Xanadu

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Distance education is a multifaceted, ambitious endeavor. Whether it is practiced by mega-universities or by small institutions, it aims at a variety of objectives (Henri, 1985). Distance-teaching makes it possible, beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, to reach people living in far-away places. It also makes it possible to reach people who don't have time to attend classes because of work, family duties, or because of physical handicaps. It is also attractive for so-called dropouts or people who dislike classrooms. Distance education (DE) relies on the use of instructional media even if the pedagogic process comes foremost; it is thus possible to combine the advantages of the best available technologies—whether high-tech, middle-tech or more traditional—and the best teaching methods to prepare self-paced courses. DE makes it possible to prepare, in a relatively short time, the kind of programs that address the changing needs of the society, especially those pertaining to vocational training (note: although it is true that some DE projects can be launched rather rapidly, the reason is primarily their special funding, which allows easier access to the necessary resources). Last, but not least, DE

COUNTRY PROFILE: Canada

Canada is slightly bigger than the United States, but has a population of only 35 million people. It is a country with vast distances and rich natural resources. Economically it has developed in parallel with the United States. Although it became a self-governing dominion in 1867, it still has ties to the British Crown. Canada has two official languages: English, spoken by 59% of the population; and French, spoken by 23% of the population. The remaining 18% covers a variety of languages.

Canada has a long and established tradition in distance education, arising from the need to provide access to education across the vast expanses of this country. After decades of development involving the educational uses of radio, television, teleconferencing, and computers, Canada has become a world leader in distance education, which has become a primary delivery system for education and training within Canada, as well as the world beyond. The explosive growth of information and communication technologies has combined perfectly to strengthen and diversify options for distance education even further.

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 6(3), 2005, pp. 199–206
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ISSN 1528-3518
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can reach large numbers of students, thus achieving significant unitary cost reduction (Rumble, 1997).

All these advantages explain why DE is so attractive to both highly-industrialized countries, which may choose to develop efficient just-in-time training systems based on individual learning, and to developing countries which may prefer to use well-known educational technologies or to take advantage of the knowledge media available to them. Unfortunately, there is less awareness about the price of these opportunities and the fact that they are oftentimes attained at the expense of each other. For example, it is possible for people living in far-away places to gain greater access to education through modern technologies such as videoconferences, online courses, or CD-ROM-based courses. But if the number of these far-away students is small, which is often the case, or if the institution relies on expensive technologies, it is likely that distance education will not be cost efficient at all. Conversely, when emphasis is laid on cost reduction, the use of technology in the individualization of teaching may become a handicap. Moreover, it is difficult to use modern technologies when teaching people who are not familiar with them or who prefer face-to-face social interaction as opposed to autonomous self-paced learning. Similarly, meeting the challenges of changing social needs may not be easy. For instance, distance-teaching institutions have to make compromises when wanting to attain a variety of goals such as trying to deliver the best courses at the lowest price, individualizing the contents as well as making allowances for some student interaction and, finally, addressing the needs of heterogeneous groups of students while constantly building a teaching staff that can respond to a variety of social needs.

This article is a descriptive overview of one aspect of the history of Quebec's Télé-université (TU). This case is used to unveil the inter-organizational and political tensions which may accompany the somewhat difficult development of a distance education model. Télé-

université was created in 1972 as an experimental project by the Université du Québec (UQ), and it got its letters of incorporation 20 years later. It is the largest distance education institution in the province of Quebec, with 25,000 students—a full load equivalent of 2,800 students—and 400 staff, including 50 professors. It can be compared with Athabasca University, the major DE institution in English-speaking Canada, which was created in 1970 and has currently an enrollment of 30,000 students—a full load equivalent of 5,700 students—and 1,028 staff.

A LONG HISTORY WITH MANY TURNABOUTS

The recent history of Université du Québec's Télé-université can be divided in six periods (Guillemet, 2003):

1. 1972-1974: the first years
2. 1974-1981: the autonomous way
3. 1981-1985: opening up to the UQ's network of universities
4. 1985-1988: institutionalization: an unfinished business
5. 1988-1992: the governmental recognition
6. 1992-2004: new problems, new directions

In order to shed light on the problems TU has encountered, each period will be discussed and conclusions will be summarized.

1972-1974: The First Years

TU was created in 1972, just a few years after the birth of UQ—a network of regional universities created to meet massive demands for degree-based university training in Quebec. Distance education was seen at that time as a creative solution to making it possible to offer courses given by UQ's professors to distant students in each region of Quebec using new technologies such as television or computers, as the University of California did. The project, based on a philosophy of lifelong

learning, was ambitious as it aimed at harnessing the mass-media to combining distance education with on-campus teaching. TU would be a new Open University, Quebec style.

However, the project was rather shaky and unclear in its objectives, especially about the relations between TU and the regional universities of UQ, which were opposed to the project. Nevertheless, TU was launched as an experimental project and was given the responsibility of coordinating two teacher-training programs offered by these universities—the first in mathematics, the other in French—as well as the task of organizing distance education in the western region of Québec and the launching of two distance learning courses (INEQ, an introduction to Quebec's economy and COOP, an introduction to the cooperative movement in Quebec). It soon appeared, however, that too many administrative bodies were involved, so that decisions were very difficult to make, and TU gained only the limited administrative autonomy asked for by its first director general (i.e., the president of TU).

1974-1981: The Autonomous Way

It soon appeared that the *popular university* which the then-director of TU wanted to build, was not the same TU envisaged by the author of the original project. For the latter, TU was to become an alternative university geared toward adult education. Nonetheless, thanks to its administrative autonomy, important opportunities for continued expansion were created and TU attracted many students with two certificate programs in sociocultural studies. As the author of the original project disagreed with these developments, he resigned. This resignation was also influenced by the decision of the president of the UQ to avoid an early statutory evaluation of TU which could have made the internal disagreements even more clear.

In the meantime, the relational problems between TU and the regional universities continued, creating a worrisome situation. TU's

continued coordination of the UQ teacher-training programs was criticized and TU was soon perceived by the regional universities as a competitor, a perception that called into question the very existence of TU. As a result, it lost this coordinating responsibility and only continued to control the two sociocultural programs.

TU had asked UQ for complete autonomy, in order to ensure its expansion. But UQ, somewhat worried about the management of TU, decided instead to relieve its director of his duties and to put TU under the tutelage of the Head Office of the Université du Québec.

1981-1985: Opening Up to the UQ's Network of Universities

Immediately after his arrival, the vice-president of UQ decided to open up TU to the network of regional universities, adding to TU's mandate the obligation of running joint projects with them. At the same time, he came to the conclusion that TU should become a center for expertise in techno-pedagogy and that only a full-fledged faculty could give it much-needed credibility. However, he left a few months later, being appointed in a large university, and a new director general was hired, who soon had to face a new ministerial regulation which hindered teachers with a certificate in sociocultural studies from earning higher wages. This regulation caused an immediate enrollment drop of 27 %, as the two sociocultural programs were recruiting a large number of teachers. Immediately, the director proposed new directions for the development of TU, which consisted of designing and offering a BA in communication with an emphasis on the use of new technologies, thus bringing TU to the fold of standard universities. For the time being, courses in educational computing would be developed, as many teachers were asking for them. These proposals were approved, and TU intensified the recruitment of new disciplinary professors. During that time, it gradually gained recognition as a major institution of higher learning by the commis-

sion set up to study the organization of adult education in Quebec. Although the minister of education agreed with the commission, he veered from creating an organization devoted to distance education in favor of an institution that would facilitate the coordination between existing administrative bodies, with an objective of economic regulation instead of providing the underprivileged with better access to education.

More difficulties arose, however, as some regional universities, which were offering their own computing courses, hampered TU from offering any new programming aimed at teachers in their regions. All this led TU to terminate joint projects with these universities.

1985-1988: Institutionalization—An Unfinished Business

In an attempt to establish better relations with the regional universities, the director general proposed a new distance education model based on the alternation between distance and on-campus courses, with some courses being given face-to-face. This seemed quite attractive, and TU's new proposal was soon accepted by UQ as the basis for its activities. During that time, however, the financial situation of TU had worsened due to heavy investments in new computer equipment and unitary costs were higher than those of UQ.

It was time to submit a request for letters of incorporation to the Council of Universities (Conseil des universités), the administrative body which would then make its recommendation to the minister of education. TU insisted on being evaluated on the same terms as any other university and stated that it wasn't asking for any emergency subsidy. The Council, however, was somewhat bewildered by the request, even though TU certainly had all the necessary expertise. It appeared that the request, specifying that TU would operate on a complementary basis with the regional universities, was too restrictive, as it would have made it impossible for Télé-université to unfold to its full potential. So, the Council refused the request

and compelled UQ to create favorable conditions for the development of DE in the next 5 years.

During the same period, another committee set up by the minister of education in order to study the future of UQ came to a rather different conclusion. TU, it said, should get back to its original mandate and should intensify its collaboration with the regional universities; moreover, it suggested that TU should become more cost-efficient than the regional universities. The minister came to the same conclusions and refused the request and asked TU to submit cost-reduction proposals.

1988-1992: Governmental Recognition

As UQ and TU were working on their new duties, another counseling body, the Council of Higher Education (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation) issued a report on distance education in Québec, which also emphasized TU's expertise. However, its proposals were rather different from those of the two other bodies: TU, it said, should become an expertise center for all Québec's universities and should give priority to joint projects and to cost reductions. This added to the puzzle that the minister had to solve.

Events then changed rapidly. At the end of the summer of 1990, a crisis broke out in the Indian territory of Oka, which lasted for 2 months and caused much ado for the Quebec government. As a result, a Cabinet reshuffle occurred and the minister of education was replaced. The new minister waived the restrictions placed on TU and the letters of incorporation were granted to TU, faster than expected.

1992-2004: New Problems, New Directions

Headed by a new director after the death of the former director general, TU was very successful in the years 1992-1995. Many students from other universities were attracted by its programs and courses and student enrollment was the highest in the UQ network of universi-

ties. At the same time, TU launched a series of joint projects with other Quebec universities outside the UQ (in addition to UQ, Quebec has three French-speaking and three English-speaking universities), and received huge financial support for its virtual campus project. Nonetheless, the president of UQ was uncertain about the possibility of TU to continue expanding because of its small faculty and therefore urged it to develop strategic alliances with other UQ constituents. Moreover, a committee set up by the UQ concluded that TU was responsible for the decline of enrollment in the regional universities and that it should cut down on its activities. TU firmly refused to comply.

Unanticipated difficulties occurred, however, in the summer of 2000 when a new student enrollment system broke down, causing a decline in enrollment. At the same time, TU, like all other universities, had to submit a performance contract to the ministry of education in order to get additional funding. It soon became clear that TU could not achieve the enrolment objectives it had projected and that it was heading toward a deficit.

A major crisis broke out in 2002, with the massive opposition of the faculty to corrective measures announced by the director general of TU. The faculty, on the one hand, argued that too much importance had been given to technology development, at the expense of academic development. Moreover, the faculty was convinced that it was time to merge Télé-université with the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM), the largest constituent of the UQ network of universities, with a faculty of 900 full-time professors. However the director general preferred to forge a strategic alliance with the small regional universities. Publicly voicing their lack of confidence in the director general, and the ensuing crisis being played out in the media during the remainder of the year, resulted in the faculty demanding the director general to resign. A new director general who promoted the merger with UQÀM was appointed in 2003 and realized the merger at the beginning of summer 2004. The aim was

for TU to double its enrolment in the following 5 years.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ITS PROBLEMS

The history of the development of the Télé-université has taught us a number of lessons.

1. A Development Handicapped by a Role Ambiguity

TU has wanted to play a double role within the UQ network, sometimes trying to be a common instrument of the the regional universities and sometimes striving to become an autonomous university competing with them. This problem was built-in from the outset, considering that the project defining TU as a common instrument of UQ was launched despite its fuzziness, and things got worse as Télé-université gained some administrative autonomy and tried to find a niche for its own activities. Télé-université could also be blamed for some of these irks and quirks, given that, in trying to become autonomous, it was ignoring the needs of the smaller regional universities, especially when they began to develop distance education through videoconferencing to reach their off-campus students. It should also be pointed out that although Télé-université was successful at some point in attracting many students, it eventually became less cost-efficient than the other universities. In the same vein, it was unable to produce the development plan requested by the minister in 1988, and failed to achieve its enrollment objectives by the end of 2000. These difficulties caused a major unprecedented internal crisis that led to Télé-université's merger with a large on-campus university even though it had been a major actor in distance education 12 years earlier. The mandate in its letters of incorporation was, one might add, too ambitious, given that it did not have the necessary resources to fulfill it.

2. *The Social Accountability of DE*

This case shows that, in spite of becoming a university with its own faculty, TU was not fully recognized by the first minister of education, who considered that TU should also become a potentially cost-efficient alternative. It also shows that the three counseling bodies that assessed Télé-université had very different views about its development; as the Council of Universities, for instance, recommended that it be given a mandate without limits, whereas the other two recommended that it curtail its autonomous activities and concentrate more on joint projects. These conflicting views help explain why the second minister of education, although of the same government, came to a different conclusion than the first minister. This case also shows that, in spite of the unrestricted mandate that was given to TU in 1992, TU had to merge with UQÀM 12 years later, under the influence of the president of UQ, who was worried about the development of DE in Quebec. All this suggest that TU was accountable for addressing educative needs and realizing the full potential of the development of DE in Quebec at the university level.

3. *The Relative Indetermination of Public Policies*

Studies of public policies suggest that public decision making often is patterned by a limited rationality model in which information is incomplete, alternatives are generated by the decision makers, and the decision makers prefer satisficing decisions to optimizing decisions, all of this making turnabouts possible when different parameters are considered (Jones, 1994). The first minister wanted TU to be cost efficient but was not able to put a dollar amount on it. The second minister had to decide whether or not the letters of incorporation should be granted but fortunately, even though the counseling bodies had different opinions about the future of TU, they were all in agreement about the quality of its activities, which was the main criterion for the decision.

Twelve years later, the minister was asked to approve the expansion of UQÀM's letters of incorporation to include DE. This turn of events suggests that public policies may vary under changing circumstances and that their conception, their implementation and their evaluation are somewhat intertwined and that they evolve in a whirlpool way. For that matter, it is interesting, in this regard, to note that no policy of distance education was adopted by the Quebec government in 2004, a situation which seems strikingly different from Great Britain's marked interest in distance education, which led to the founding of the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU) at the end of the 1960s. But as many problems compete for attention on the public agenda, it should be remembered that public policy often rises from the haphazard encounter of problems, solutions, and decision makers willing to make fruitful decisions (Kingdon, 1995).

In more general terms, the story of TU helps us identify five parameters that can be used as hypotheses for making generalizations about the development of distance education:

- Addressing the needs of DE. How do institutions address the DE needs voiced by pressure groups, prescribed by the government or diagnosed by faculty? This has been particularly well stressed by Daniel (1996), who urges distance-teaching institutions to be alert about the reports and surveys published by the governments and their advising bodies. In addition to analyzing educational needs, these institutions must be able to make alliances with the groups which will eventually benefit from distance education. Maybe the most worrisome aspect of the difficult development of TU was its inability to achieve its objectives.
- Efficient management of DE projects. What social needs, human and technical resources, and unitary costs should be factored into the efficient management of distance education projects? It would

appear that the answer is in the ability to compromise between distance education opportunities and efficient program planning factored against available resources. For example, Télé-université was particularly efficient at offering management programs to students who were mostly women with children, using online courses, but conversely it chose not to offer the job-oriented BA in computing, which many students asked for, because work had already begun on a postgraduate program, which ironically attracted very few students.

- A shared ideology on DE. In what ways could institutions come to a common understanding about the nature and practice of distance education? It is obvious that internal crises, such as the one that struck TU in 2002, are simply counterproductive. Ideology is not limited to creating successful strategic alliances; it also deals with the very essence of distance education as an educative and learning process. The distance education reality raises a series of questions such as: does DE necessarily imply the temporal and spatial separation between the faculty and its student body, and between students? Should some virtual interaction be created between the learner and the educator? Is videoconference-based tele-teaching an appropriate means to offer distance education? These questions are important for TU, as it shifts toward a bimodal educational model following its merger with UQÀM. Another uneasy question is whether TU should be considered as a university like any other university or should also be considered somewhat different (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). By the same token, the technology appears to be a part of the central ideology, as it brings about different ways of teaching and learning (Daniel, 1996).
- Effectiveness of DE institutions. Which considerations are of primary impor-

tance to DE institutions as they juggle with issues of teaching effectiveness, student registration, rate of graduation, cost efficiency and cost effectiveness, research grants, and institutional reputation? Grants and resource allocation are also part of the effectiveness equation and may even contribute to, or influence, the working out of policies. For example, TU was very effective in the years 1992-1995 and was able to get substantial funding for its virtual campus, but this effectiveness declined somewhat in the following years, TU being unable to attract new students in spite of the recruitment of new faculty.

- Support for the institutionalization process. How important is support from consultative and administrative bodies and government to the institutionalization process that guarantees the establishment of DE? As this case suggests, the diverging visions of the consultative bodies about TU's role and future were a handicap. More often than not, governments prefer to have solutions rather than problems. Moreover, it also happens that problems disappear from the political agenda when the decision is not easy to make (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963).

A LONG WAY TO XANADU

Recently, TU argued before a parliamentary commission that it had a rich potential and that, in comparison with the situation of DE in countries like France, Germany, Great Britain, or Spain, it could reach three to four times more students. However, it was unable to explain why it was currently so far from realizing this potential. The merger with UQÀM will certainly be of great help, as this university has a far larger faculty, but one must factor in the fact that there will be problems arising from merging two dissimilar universities in terms of sizes and teaching traditions, as well as

finding the delicate balance between the constituents of the UQ network of universities.

Maybe the major handicap of TU was that it was unable to work as a political entrepreneur, whereby TU could have taken advantage of Quebec's education problems to promote the potential of distance education. With these considerations in mind, it is safe to say that TU still has a long way to go before becoming Quebec's Open University.

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