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Authors	McCarthy, Olive
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

CHAPTER 14

SQUARE PEGS IN ROUND HOLES: EXPERIENCES OF DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES IN UCC

Olive McCarthy
Centre for Co-operative Studies & Department of Food Business and Development

From the earliest days of proposing the distance learning BSc in Mutual and Credit Union Business, it became clear that this new programme was not going to fit comfortably into '*the way we do things around here*'. Everything from course marketing to registration and teaching to examinations could never slot into the neat formula of conventional university course offerings. And considering the target students for this BSc programme, that was not surprising.

Picture addressing a group of potential students who have been away from the formal education system for several years, live a distance from UCC, hold down full-time jobs, have a spouse or partner, school-going children and aging parents. Now tell this group that if they wish to study for a degree in UCC, they must follow the conventional route to education: daily lectures on campus requiring full-time commitment. There will be few followers. But invite this group to study when and where they wish, attend weekend lectures and tutorials in a venue close to home every 3-6 weeks, and complete the exams at venues and times designed to suit their needs. There will be a cohort of followers.

And this has been precisely the experience of the Centre for Co-operative Studies and the Department of Food Business and Development in developing distance learning degree programmes. A number of successful distance learning degree programmes have been developed with the co-operation of other academic departments and universities: the first of these, the BSc in Mutual and Credit Union Business, which builds on the Diploma in Credit Union Studies and the Diploma in Social Integration and Enterprise and is offered through the Faculty of Commerce, broke new ground. In many respects, it paved the way for the BSc in Rural Development, which is offered by the four NUI constituent universities and builds on the Diploma in Rural Development. In UCC, it is offered through the Faculty of Food Science and Technology. And most recently, the MBS in Co-operative and Social Enterprise has been approved by the university as a distance learning progression route for graduates of the distance learning degrees. The MBS will be delivered entirely over the worldwide web.

The first key to the success of these programmes to date has, first and foremost, been the strong teamwork that has been associated with their delivery. Genuine co-operation and strong working relationships between academics and administrators within and across many departments and sections in the university have steadily built up. The second key to success has been the clear identification of the needs of distance learning students and the tailoring of courses and conventional structures to suit these needs. This has been a learning process and has resulted in the necessity for a paradigm shift by both academics and administrators throughout the university. Existing structures are evolving to accommodate the unique needs of distance learners separately and in a more flexible manner, perhaps, to those of conventional students. Openness

to change and willingness to accommodate unique needs have been crucial. Unlike most conventional students, distance learning students do not need to present themselves on campus for registration, lectures and tutorials, or examinations. Distance learning students now experience greater flexibility across a range of issues, primarily because of a recognition of their conflicting personal commitments.

From a staffing point of view, openness to skills development and capacity building has been central to distance learning. Training in the design and writing of effective distance learning materials has been essential. Courses in website design and on-line learning have been invaluable.

Advances in technology have played no small role in accommodating the needs of distance learning students. These have been introduced gradually and fine-tuned as necessary. In 2002/2003, the use of Blackboard software was piloted on one module. It proved extremely effective as a supportive tool to the extent that students, in their feedback, have requested a dedicated website for their entire course. This is being provided from 2003/2004. The use of CD-ROM for course materials has also been piloted, giving students access to hyperlinks for browsing relevant websites. The ability of students to access timetables and results through the university website has been hugely welcomed by the distance learning students and is a resource that is widely used by them. Indeed the ease with which students have taken these new technologies on board has prompted the delivery of the new MBS in Co-operative and Social Enterprise entirely over the web, enabling true distance learning to be offered by the university anywhere in the world. The recent acquisition of mobile classrooms in the university is another new technological resource that will be usefully employed and reminds us that we need continuously to bear in mind the web access needs of mature students, particularly those who suffer from social disadvantage. Access to the web may also be possible for distance learning students through local libraries, credit unions, co-operatives, and other community development organisations.

For the most part, the existing structures have adapted well to accommodate the needs of distance learners. Fundamental challenges remain to be addressed more comprehensively, although discussions are on-going at a number of levels. The first of these relates to resource allocation for which interim structures are in place. This has implications at a number of levels, but particularly in the employment of staff. The second relates to the issue of credit accumulation. The introduction of such a system may help to improve access to university programmes by those distance learners who feel more comfortable breaking their learning into more manageable chunks.

Overall, our experiences of distance learning programmes have been positive and rewarding. At times, placing a distance learning student within the current university learning structures has been akin to forcing a square peg into a round hole. Over time, however, the hole is proving that it can be moulded in different ways to accommodate differently shaped pegs. Given the demographic decline in the numbers of conventional students seeking third level education, distance learning is likely to continue to grow in importance for the future of the university.