

The concept DISTANCE EDUCATION

Introduction

The phenomenon Distance Education¹, established at least a couple of hundred years back, has clearly been separated from what has been going on in schools and at campuses. Printed material and communication between students and their teachers and tutors via postal mail have been the core elements of it. Through the advancements of educational technologies and an increased focus on the pedagogics of education Distance Education and campus-based education have merged.

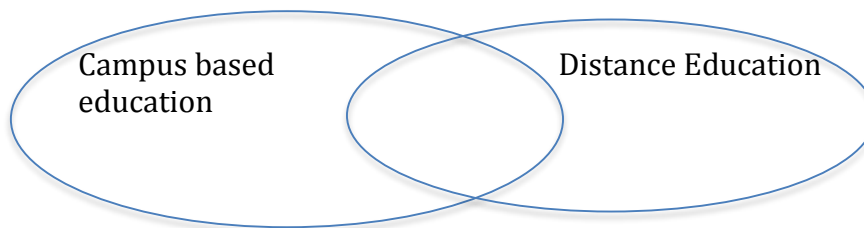


Figure 1: Merging of two modes of education²

Campus based education implements methodology used for a long time within distance education. It has also increased access to learning material and to communication in the educational settings through the application of technologies, sometimes mentioned as technology-enhanced learning (TEL). Distance Education has transformed and often includes face-to-face sessions at campuses or learning centres, often addressed as *blended learning*. The old forms of distance education with a distinct separation between teachers and students could be found under the concept *online learning*, but today prospering on the qualities that Internet and the developments of media technologies have contributed with. What we have experienced the last decades is how the educational settings have offered

¹ The references used in this short paper are rather old. That does not mean that the international discourse on the concept distance education is brought to a close. The references point to articles and books published during a time when the concept was analysed in a way with high relevance for the IDEAL project.

² Hansson, H. & Holmberg, C. (2005) *Sweden: 106 Years of Distance Education. Development and Competing Paradigms*. Distance Education in China, 2, 2005.

more and more of flexibility. The two different paradigms are merging. The terms coined for that are *flexible learning* or *flexible education*.

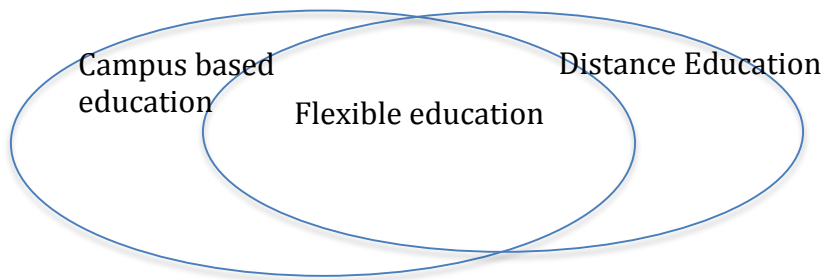


Figure 2: Mixed organisational forms of education – flexible education

A wide family of related concepts have developed to describe the changes and improvements. Some of the concepts are anchored in policies. Others have their connotations to organisational forms of education or the use of technologies. A third group are more related to pedagogical theory. An overview of them is given in the following table. The concepts could of course connect to more than one of the columns in the table.

Table 1: Concepts describing developments in education³

Distance education eLearning Flexible education Just-in-time-learning Lifelong learning Life wide learning Open and distance learning Open learning Recurrent education	Blended learning Borderless education Computer supported learning Flexible learning Mobile learning Net-based learning Online learning Virtual learning Virtual university Web based learning Technology enhanced learning	Collaborative learning Edutainment Digital Game based learning - Games2Train - Games that teach - Policy games - Learning Games - Serious Games Individualised learning Interactive education Learning labs
Concepts primarily related to		
POLICY	ORGANISATION TECHNOLOGY	PEDAGOGICAL THEORY

The aim of this short paper is not to move into explanations of this flora of concepts rather to set one of the core concepts of the IDEAL project, Distance Education in its context.

³ Adapted from Holmberg, C. (2006) Flexibelt lärande – från korrespondensundervisning till öppna och fria studier i Borgström, L & Gougoulakis, P. (Eds) **Vuxenantologin. En grundbok om vuxnas lärande.** Stockholm: Atlas akademi

Different aspects of Distance Education

The project proposal referred to the definition of Distance Education used by UNESCO (2002): “The terms *open learning* and *distance education* represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.”⁴

The occurrence of *openness* has a long tradition in e.g. university summer courses and in “Folk High Schools”. It has been adopted mainly within politics to stress increased access to education, with the ambitions to move into the knowledge society by increasing the student populations. In some countries entrance qualifications to higher education has changed to adapt to and increase openness.

The Canadian researcher Ross Paul⁵ defined Open Learning as:

- *the removal of restrictions, exclusions and privileges*
- *the accreditation of students' previous experience*
- *flexibility in managing the time variable*
- *substantial changes in the traditional relationships between professors and students*

(Paul 1990)

Openness in this sense exists, but is rare among higher education institutions. What is widespread is openness with the meaning easier access to education through the use of technologies.

Likewise included in the UNESCO definition of Distance Education is “freeing learners from the constraints of time and place”. It is in line with the classic definition of the concept. ICDE coined the following:

Distance education is a mode of education in which the student and the teacher are separated in time and/or space and where two-way communication takes place through non-traditional means for the most part.

(ICDE)

⁴ UNESCO (2002), Open and Distance Learning. Trends, Policy and Strategy Considerations. Paris: UNESCO

⁵ Paul, R.H. (1990) *Open learning and open management: Leadership and integrity in distance education*. London: Kogan Page.

That type of definition was criticised by researchers in the field, e.g. Keegan (1990)⁶, Holmberg (1989)⁷. What they stressed were that Distance Education to be realised need advanced educational planning. They stressed that the complexity of the task need team work between specialists not just in the subject to be taught but also in issues related to organisation of the learning scenarios and the use of educational technologies. Desmond Keegan phrased it this way:

Distance education is a form of education characterised by

- *the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)*
- *the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teaches yourself programmes)*
- *the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course*
- *the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)*
- *the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes.*

(Keegan 1990)

A third aspect brought into the definitions by UNESCO is flexibility. Also that is partly problematic when looking at how courses and programmes are organised in higher education. Most often there are certain degrees of flexibility but on the whole the regime requires the students to follow specific organisational patterns. Swedish Agency for Distance Education⁸ used the concept flexible education and meant that they could identify a series of aspects/variables, which constituted the concept. They included both learner- and provider perspectives.

Flexible education makes it possible for students to select place, time, tempo and way of studying. The education providers plan, organise, realise teaching with the purpose to support students' communication and learning. Thus from a student's perspective flexible education could be characterised as possibilities to

⁶ Keegan, D, (1990) *Foundations of distance education*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.

⁷ Holmberg, B. (1989) *Theory and practice of distance education*. New York: Routledge.

⁸ Swedish Agency for Distance Education (DISTUM) was organised under the Ministry of Education and Research 1990 – 2001 to ease the transformation processes in Higher Education towards increased flexibility.

- *study and follow teaching from home or from another place separated from the education provider*
- *begin studies and take part in teaching at self selected time*
- *perform studies in self selected tempo*
- *study together with other students or as a single student*

The education provider should make these studies possible through

- *developing and adapting teaching material*
- *developing and adapting material supportive to the students' work*
- *developing and adapting ways for assessment of students' knowledge*
- *using ICT⁹ to bridge distance in time and space*
- *being available during students' work to*
 - *guide studies*
 - *support students' work and communication*
 - *give an administrative framework for the studies.*

(Distum 2000¹⁰)

DISTUM's approach was very practical and focused on operationalizing the concept. It stresses flexibility for the students and demands flexibility from the provider. Thus it demonstrates a way through which "Distance Education", in this case Flexible Education can be observed.

Distance Education within the IDEAL project

Two major types of institutions offer courses and programmes presented at the DistanceLearningPortal. Some offer solely distance education, so called single mode institutions (Open Universities). Other providers work both with campus based and distance education, so called dual mode institutions. Whilst the Open Universities may provide high degree of flexibility in their provision, most probably the higher education institutions at large have a limited degree of openness and flexibility.

To use a strict definition of distance education will be problematic. As demonstrated above it could be argued that Distance Education has become a generic term. The interpretations vary to a large extent from one provider to another. One course or programme announced as distance education

⁹ ICT an abbreviation of Information and Communication Technologies

¹⁰ Presented in Holmberg, C. (2001) ***Towards a new scenario for Distance Education in Sweden.*** Contribution to the 20th World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, in Düsseldorf, Germany 1-5. April 2001

may give students high degree of flexibility while others have an approach limiting student flexibility.

When observing Distance Education provided by higher education institutions courses and programmes could be characterized in relation to the variables used by DISTUM. It is foreseen that some of the variables (or aspects) could be analysed on different levels or in different amounts and others are dichotomies. The table below will summarise this article. It attempts to give an overview of the key variables or aspects needed when the IDEAL-project shall identify and describe the distance education courses and programmes delivered by higher education institutions. It could of course be discussed if some of the variables belong to one or the other “type” but this is a suggestion to start with.

Table 2: How is distance education provided?

Can the student?	“Type” of variable
Study and follow teaching from a place separated from the education provider	0 -100%
Begin studies at self selected time	Dichotomy
Take part in teaching at self selected time	0 -100%
Study in self selected tempo	Dichotomy
Study together with other students or as a single student	Dichotomy
Does the provider?	
Demand specific entrance qualifications (or is the course open)	Dichotomy
Develop/adapt teaching material specific for distance education	Dichotomy
Develop material supporting students’ work (study guides)	Dichotomy
Develop/adapt specific ways for assessment of distance education students	Dichotomy
Use technology to bridge distance in time and space	Dichotomy
Is the provider?	
Available during students’ work to guide studies	0 -100%
Available during students’ work to support students’ use of technology	0 -100%
Available during students’ work to give an administrative framework for the studies.	0 -100%