

Distance learning

Distance learning is becoming increasingly popular with international students as a more flexible, cheaper way of gaining a qualification from an overseas university. Bethan Norris finds out how this sector has been developing in recent years.

The popularity of distance learning programmes has largely mirrored the development of the Internet. "Distance learning is increasingly becoming the cost-effective option for continuing education," confirms Paul Smith from the Distance Learning Programme at Imperial College London in the UK. "This is being facilitated by developments in learning technology that are seeing the teaching interface changing from the actual classroom to the virtual, with online learning environments and video conferencing becoming increasingly viable options."

The last 10 years have seen an explosion of distance learning courses available, catering for students who do not have the time, flexibility or money to attend their course in person. While previously largely catering for students from their own countries, many universities and colleges have found that their distance learning courses are now more popular with international students.

"Overseas students often intend to study in the USA and want to get started online due to the expense considerations or, as is more recently the case, due to visa-related delays,"



says Dean Kempter at Edlearn Consortium, a group of nine education institutions in Washington State that offer distance learning programmes. "Often, these students aspire to the cachet of an American education, but lack the resources to pursue the goal through conventional means."

In many countries, students have been reluctant to undertake distance learning programmes due to preconceptions that a qualification gained in this way will have a lesser value than one achieved through traditional means. However, Smith points out that distance learning providers have made great strides in changing this perception in recent years. "The Open University in the UK has led the way in demonstrating the equivalence of its courses," he says. "There is a lot of low quality stuff on the web that is pedagogically unsound, however, and it is the task of providers such as ourselves to make potential employers aware of the differences."

David Farquhar, Chief Operating Officer at the Interactive University (IU) based in Edinburgh in the UK, is also quick to point out the value of their distance learning courses. "There is no distinction between the education received by the student studying an IU programme overseas or one studying the same course at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh," he says. "The syllabus, content, examinations and examiners are identical and validation is identical."

Course progression within distance learning programmes is usually extremely flexible with students able to take as few or as many courses as they require at any one time. At Edlearn Consortium, students have the choice of hundreds of courses at different qualification levels due to the variety of education providers in its membership. "For the community college members, the most popular programmes tend to be the general two-year degrees that lead into BA completion programmes at the four-year universities that are also members of the consortium," says Kempter.

As attitudes towards distance learning change, more and more student markets are opening up. Rhys Williams at the University of Wales says they now have Greek enrolments after the Greek constitution was changed to recognise distance learning and a distance learning university was established in Greece. Sonal Parekh at Education Concepts and Options in India says demand is not high as "students feel that if they can afford to they would rather study abroad". But she adds, "I feel this could be changing now, especially in the small towns." ○

Course delivery

The dawn of the Internet has revolutionised distance learning and enabled students to readily access course materials as well as contact other students and tutors in another country at the click of a mouse. Online discussion groups, email, Internet resources and, in some cases, video conferencing enable students to feel part of a learning environment wherever their geographical location.

Paul Smith from Imperial College London in the UK says that their distance learning students are currently provided with all their learning materials in hard copy but adds, "We are moving increasingly towards electronic delivery, either CD-based or via the Internet".

While the whole point of distance learning courses is that they can be studied off-campus, many institutions offer their students the chance to engage in face-to-face learning, either through local tutorial groups in their home country or through short visits to the university campus, or a mixture of both. "Many of our students study in a mixed mode – that is both through supported distributed learning in their home country and coming to Scotland for a few months of study," says David Farquhar from Interactive University in Edinburgh in the UK.

Selection of institutions providing distance learning courses

	Location	Pay agency commission	No. of students	% int. students
BYU Independent Study	USA		100,000	3
Edlearn Consortium	USA	varies	7,000	10
Imperial College London	UK		1,000	80
Interactive University	UK		100,000	43
Phone Languages	Belgium		30,000	30
University of Wales	UK	✓	600	17