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## Bricks and mortar, or clicks and tricks?

*J Nevan Wright*

*Sui Tinai*

*Auckland Institute of Studies*

### **Abstract**

The home page of the International Association for Distance Learning (IADL, n.d.) claims that the future of distance learning is positive. That might be the future, but the present shows that distance learning has yet to fulfil its promise. Research finds that on average the completion rate for students who enrol in a distance learning institution is only 10%! By comparison the completion rate in the United Kingdom at traditional 'bricks and mortar' higher education institutions is 82%. This paper explores reasons for the failure of distance learning institutions to deliver their promises, and postulates that traditional face-to-face teaching is here to stay. However, the impact and opportunities provided by information technology cannot be ignored. It is found that a blended, or hybrid, model consisting of face-to-face learning facilitation supported by technology, is already in vogue. The genie is out of the bottle. The challenge for teachers, lecturers, learning facilitators and professors is to embrace and use the online availability of up-to-date news, case studies and research to maintain currency for their learning material and lectures. For students, the advantages are online submission of exercises and assessments, and the ability for self-directed learning using handheld devices. Nonetheless, the overwhelming need will be for face-to-face support and guidance. It has always been possible to learn the rudiments of brain surgery or how to fly from a book, but people would prefer a surgeon who has gained hands-on practical experience under the guidance of and in the presence of a specialist; likewise to fly with a pilot who has learnt in the air and from sitting alongside an instructor.

*Keywords:* Higher education, distance learning, information technology, hybrid model

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## History

In 1840, distance learning was successfully introduced by Isaac Pitman when he began sending students passages from the Bible in shorthand, and the student would 'translate' and mail back their answer for marking. Pitman was using the new technology of the day, the penny post system that had just been introduced (Almquist, 2011).

The next step in distance learning was 90-odd years later, when in the 1930s radio was used in classrooms. Students would still attend classes and teachers would be present to maintain classroom discipline. The teacher would turn the radio on and the class would listen to a broadcast lesson. Each broadcast would last for up to an hour, but the limited amount of broadcast time "destined radio usage to be viewed as a supplement to teacher instruction" (Cuban, 1986, p. 22). The expectation was that eventually radio would become the master teacher, and classroom teachers would be mere monitors. Indeed in 1948 John Taylor, president of the University of Louisville, predicted that "the college-by-radio would put American education 25 years ahead" (Cox & Morison, 2000, p. 116). The city-owned University would enable citizens to receive materials in the mail and to listen to live radio broadcasts of classroom discussions. Fees were nominal for citizens (Cox & Morison, 2000, pp 115-117). This initiative lasted barely five years.

The next milestone in the evolution of technology and distance learning was television courses. The Ford Foundation financed television courses for the University of California and some community colleges during the 1970s. Again, this proved to be unsuccessful, although some institutions continued with television courses into the 1990s. Indeed the first author of this paper was the last supervisor for a television course of the Business School of Auckland Institute of Technology which ended in 1997. There were only two students.

In the 1990s, we were entering the digital age and fresh hopes were held for distance learning through virtual universities and, by inference, for the eventual demise of bricks and mortar. The digital age and the internet, with voice, online videos, and extensive databases of journals and research papers, provided all the requisites for a virtual university to function. The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia, n.d.)

became the first fully online university in 1994, and is today still offering Bachelor's and postgraduate degrees and courses. There are several other functioning virtual universities but their existence is not threatening the existence of the traditional bricks and mortar establishments.

Tertiary distance learning began in New Zealand in 1946 with the formation of the Technical Correspondence Institute. The intention was to assist World War II returned servicemen to gain national training in the trades. In 1990, it was renamed the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (n.d.) and courses were provided by correspondence. As a correspondence school, it advertised "study at your own pace in your own place". In the 1990s, 150 years after Pitman pioneered distance learning through correspondence, many educators firmly believed that the days of heavy capital investment in buildings to house classrooms, student dormitories, libraries and staff (teaching and administration) were numbered. This belief was further strengthened in the 2000s as Information Technology became more reliable, affordable and available to most people. In 2017, with handheld devices, Wi-Fi, broadband, social media, e-books, e-journals, search engines, etc, it might be appealing to dream of no more bricks and mortar and that the future will be in clicks and tricks. However, New Zealand's leading university, the University of Auckland, obviously does not subscribe to this view of utopia. In the last ten years, it has had a huge building program including opening a new campus in Newmarket, Auckland. A new 11-storey building is under construction and will open in 2019. Obviously this university believes in the need for students to be physically present and active on campus.

### **Advantages of virtual education**

Apart from doing away with capital investment and the maintenance of bricks and mortar, what are the possible other advantages in going virtual? The IADL (n.d.) lists some of the advantages as being that:

1. Continuous learning will be essential and easily available.
2. International study will not be dependent on travel.
3. Technical familiarity will have increasing value.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand adds that, as well as being able to study at your own pace, students can study when and where they like. In short, learners do not have to be in any specific place in order to gain a

degree from any institution in the world: "Study designed to work around one person ... you" (Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, n.d.).

### **Disadvantages of virtual education**

But what is the reality? Research finds that, on average, the completion rate for students who enrolled in a distance learning institution is only 10%. By comparison, the completion rate in the UK at traditional bricks and mortar higher education institutions is 82%. Auckland Institute of Studies (AIS), New Zealand's largest private traditional postgraduate provider, has a completion rate of 99%. Compared with completion rates for distance learning institutions, the best performer of a distance learning institution is the UK Open University with a completion rate of 22%, followed by Dr Ambedkar University of India (14%), the University of South Africa (6%), the Open University of the Netherlands (2.5%) and the University of Quebec (0.5%) (Simpson, 2013). The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand claims a high completion rate, but their percentage of completions is calculated per paper and not by completed qualifications. One calculation is that their completion rate by qualification is 21 to 22%, thus in line with the UK Open University.

So what are the disadvantages for a student who opts to study by distance learning? The main drawbacks are:

1. Missing out on campus life. This is one of the main attractions for people leaving school, to get away from home and to meet new people. In New Zealand, many young people from Auckland near the north of North Island choose to study 1,000 kms away at Otago University, Dunedin, near the south of South Island.
2. Learners are not sitting at the feet of the lecturer. There is no interaction, no empathy. A comparison is to ask why people go to concerts, the ballet, a rock concert, or a sports events. It is cheaper to download and watch in the comfort of one's own lounge. However, being at the concert or the game involves all the senses. It is the same in the classroom or lecture theatre; it provides the opportunity of direct interchange with the lecturer and with fellow students.
3. Exam and assessment integrity.
4. Lack of interpersonal group activities.
5. A perception that an online qualification lacks rigour and is therefore not as credible for a prospective employer.

There is a further major disadvantage. If all education was provided by distance, there would be no need for students to leave home and to study abroad. In the New Zealand context, this would be economic disaster. Infometrics (2016) reported that the value to New Zealand of hosting international students in 2016 was NZ\$4.28 billion, providing 32,000 jobs in education (teachers and administrators). Without international students, many institutions would close down.

A further drawback of distance learning is that students do not necessarily, indeed seldom, have the flexibility of study that they imagined. Distance learning can be paced or self-paced. If paced delivery is synchronised with campus delivery, that is, there will be terms or semesters, and deadlines, it is not at the students' own pace. If self-paced, students can start any time, rush through their studies or take as long as they like. If paced, students working from home invariably have problems with keeping to deadlines. If self-paced, students take holidays, breaks from studies, and have difficulty in keeping enthusiastic. Generally students will take on more than they can manage, they find it hard to juggle work, social and sports life and, if in employment, workplace demands, and maintain a study regime.

From a distance learning provider's point of view, it is found that student expectations are high. They expect instant replies on the course website. Lecturers therefore cannot have the luxury of having set two or three office hours per week. One study (Davison et al, 2006) found, from a survey of 131 students, 79% expected confirmation of assignments within 24 hours and that they would be graded immediately or at least within two business days. This is a costly service to provide in terms of teaching resource and administration resource.

An example of the challenges of moving to purely online delivery can be found with the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. In 1990, courses were delivered by correspondence and there were 400 teachers and 100 support staff, a ratio of 4:1. By 2015, courses were delivered online, and the teaching staff had dropped to 120 and administration/support staff had risen to 282, a ratio of 1: 2.35. Of further interest is that in 1990 there were 35,000 equivalent full-time students, and in 2015 31,000 equivalent full-time students, a decrease in student numbers of 11.5%. Over the same period, the population of New Zealand grew from 3.3 million to 4.6 million, an increase

of 40%. This would certainly indicate that The Open Polytechnic and distance learning in New Zealand as a pure play model is losing ground.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is suggested that bricks and mortar is here to stay. Radio was a supplement to learning in the 1930s, and online learning and delivery can provide great value to the learning experience. A blended or hybrid model, consisting of face-to-face learning facilitation supported by technology, has already been widely adopted. The challenge for teachers, lecturers, learning facilitators and professors is to embrace and use the online availability of up-to-date news, case studies and research to maintain currency for their learning material and lectures. For students, the advantages are online submission of exercises and assessments, and the ability for self-directed learning using handheld devices. Nonetheless, the ongoing and overwhelming need will be for face-to-face support and guidance.

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