



Distance Education Strategy to 2020

This document presents the University's Strategic Plan for Distance Education over the period 2014-2020, outlining how the University can embrace the opportunities and meet the challenges of distance education.



Introduction

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO

Distance education has been offered by the University of Otago for around 30 years. With a diverse distance programme that has a particular strength in postgraduate courses in the Health Sciences, the University serves students throughout New Zealand and the world.

Distance learners at Otago are markedly different from Otago's on-campus cohort. The distance cohort has a wider age spread and a much larger proportion of postgraduate students. The very high percentage of part-time students reflects the largely full-time employment of the group.

The distance programme draws on the University's major strengths. Staff bring to their teaching: expertise and leadership in research, a commitment to evolving and exploring the research-teaching link, and ongoing positive engagement with the learning of their students.

Distance teaching takes advantage of real-time and asynchronous technologies available within the University. Effective administrative and academic support ensures a helpful and efficient learning environment for all distance students, wherever they are located, in New Zealand or elsewhere around the world.

Distance education enables students beyond the physical campus environment to engage in professional growth and to extend their knowledge, understanding and skills, through participation in opportunities for lifelong learning. This Strategy briefly outlines how Divisions, Schools and Departments can embrace new opportunities to enhance distance education at Otago.

THE UNIVERSITY'S COMMITMENT

Distance learning activities are strongly integrated within the University strategic planning document: Strategic Direction to 2020. Distance learning engages with and advances each of the University's strategic imperatives to enhance the University's strategic direction. This Strategy should be read in conjunction with The University of Otago Teaching and Learning Plan 2013-2020.

TRENDS AFFECTING DISTANCE EDUCATION

Patterns of distance education are influenced by educational and wider social trends. Those that impact positively include the increasing demand for lifelong learning, the growing requirement for a large range of professionals to undertake continuing professional education, and employment patterns that require the ability to retrain and upgrade skills while in employment.

The increasing use of an ever-expanding range of digital technologies will continue to impact markedly on methods of engaging with students and on creating and providing high quality digitally-based learning environments that are increasingly personalised, media-rich and interactive.

Open access to information and education resources means distance student experiences of high quality teaching, underpinned by strong research-teaching links, will become increasingly important for ensuring that institutions thrive.

A DISTANCE EDUCATION FUTURE AT OTAGO

VISION

The University will be known for its leadership and excellence in teaching, learning and support of distance students and its distance education programme will reflect the University's distinctive contribution to national and international education.

A DISTANCE EDUCATION FUTURE

Distance education at the University of Otago will play a role in:

LEADING QUALITY THROUGH

Recognition of Otago's distance teaching expertise at national and international levels

Ongoing support programmes for students and staff engaged in distance education

Processes and resources that support consistency and coherence of distance programmes and their teaching across the University

LEADING INNOVATIVE TEACHING THAT IS INFORMED BY CURRENT RESEARCH, THROUGH

Extensive development of high-quality distance programmes focussing on postgraduate Certificates, Diplomas, Masters and Doctoral programmes in areas of specific expertise, and support for undergraduate areas in niche markets

Universal use of core digital tools for distance teaching alongside active exploration of new technologies

An active teaching and research community based around pedagogical and technological innovation within distance education

LEADING ENGAGEMENT, WITH

An outstanding digitally based 'connected campus', linking distance students to all services in the University

Connections to external groups such as business and professional organisations, accrediting bodies and alumni.

The path to this future supports engagement with a number of opportunities but requires responses to several challenges.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Advancing distance education will occur in an environment that is changing within the University and beyond it. The changes faced will present opportunities and challenges as outlined below.

DEVELOPING DISTANCE EDUCATION SUSTAINABLY

A global education marketplace and demand for lifelong education bring access to a widespread and diverse student body. Distance education serves this group without the same intensity of physical space and resource limitations faced by campus-based education. Challenges are:

Developing targeted markets: Promote our unique academic expertise to bring a larger group of talented, motivated students within the University's reach.

Developing an international portfolio: Build a suite of internationally recognised distance course offerings reflecting the unique strengths of the University of Otago, and shape University processes to sustain an international distance student body.

Attracting students: Compete effectively for New Zealand and international distance students in a global education market.

ENSURING EXCELLENCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

New pedagogies can be combined with digital technologies to make new approaches to distance education possible and support research informed excellence in teaching. Challenges are:

Creating rich learning environments: Progressively enhance resourcing for production of high quality distance learning material and the development of excellence in teaching in digital spaces.

Choosing technologies wisely: Select an effective suite of core digital learning tools and support innovation and research activities around and beyond that core.

Supporting staff and students: Develop coordinated and systematic support for widely distributed distance education participants, and sustain it across the institution.

Assuring quality: Develop processes to ensure appropriate and consistent standards of course quality and outstanding student experience across all distance education offerings.

CONTRIBUTING AND CONNECTING THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education enables the University to contribute nationally and internationally by serving widespread students, alumni and professional communities. Challenges are:

Enhancing connections: Foster engagement between the University, its students, and professional communities and alumni, nationally and internationally.

Building an outstanding Otago experience: Ensure distance students have a sense of connection to the University and participate in a wider Otago student experience.

GOALS

1. RECOGNITION

Wide recognition and acceptance within and beyond the University of Otago of the University's role as a provider of high quality distance education.

STRATEGIES

- 1.1 Promote Otago as a distance learning provider to alumni and the wider community
- 1.2 Identify, publicise and disseminate exemplary distance education practices, and highlight the rewards and contribution of distance teaching at the University of Otago
- 1.3 Strengthen current relationships and forge new connections with national and international distance education bodies

2. STRENGTH AND GROWTH

Growth in distance offerings consistent with the role of distance education as a means to strengthen and give breadth to Otago's teaching in areas of specialist expertise, particularly at postgraduate level.

STRATEGIES

- 2.1 Identify areas for involvement with distance learning and teaching within the University, especially in course work based postgraduate qualifications
- 2.2 Prioritise and undertake development of distance courses in areas where there is demonstrated professional or academic demand, nationally or internationally
- 2.3 Build understanding of distance teaching approaches and enable their transfer between Departments and Divisions

3. QUALITY

Enhancement of the quality of distance teaching and distance student support through sustained awareness of developments in distance pedagogy, high quality course and material design, and increased understanding of distance learning contexts.

STRATEGIES

- 3.1 Undertake ongoing review of the current state of global distance education and its likely trajectory
- 3.2 Participate in programme and Departmental reviews to foster appropriate use of distance learning pedagogies and technologies and encourage development of innovative approaches to distance teaching
- 3.3 Promote and support research into distance teaching initiatives
- 3.4 Undertake collaborative benchmarking nationally and internationally with institutions offering programmes similar to those of this University

4. TECHNOLOGIES

Enhancement of the distance learning experience through appropriate use of a range of technologies and digital resources.

STRATEGIES

- 4.1 Provide information, advice, and the opportunity for staff to explore new technologies and new uses of current learning technologies in support of distance learning and teaching
- 4.2 Pilot research-led innovations in teaching with both new and existing technologies
- 4.3 Encourage programme level decision-making about use of technologies in distance education
- 4.4 Encourage engagement with Information Technology Services in the choice and implementation of new technologies for distance teaching

5. COLLEGIALITY, COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIPS AND SUPPORT

Effective support that is underpinned by current research for staff and students engaged in distance teaching and learning.

STRATEGIES

- 5.1 Reinforce and enhance professional development activities for distance teaching and support staff through collaboration with the Higher Education Development Centre (HEDC)
- 5.2 Create further opportunities for distance students to access high quality Library resources and develop information literacy and effective learning strategies
- 5.3 Proactively engage with students to support their distance learning experience through activities of Te Huka Mātauraka (Māori Student Support), the Pacific Islands Centre and International, HEDC and the Graduate Research School
- 5.4 Develop the distance learning website to disseminate best practice in distance teaching, case studies and other support resources for distance teaching and support staff and distance students
- 5.5 Collaborate with staff to research distance education, in particular with College of Education researchers into distance and e-learning.

6. ENGAGEMENT

Rich connections among distance staff, students, and external organisations in support of lifelong engagement between the University and the widespread communities it serves.

STRATEGIES

- 6.1 Support Departments to develop programme-based approaches to the design of distance learning
- 6.2 Provide opportunities for staff to learn and make choices about a range of ways in which they can enhance their interaction with students
- 6.3 Provide and promote opportunities for students to network across the distance learning student body
- 6.4 Engage with external agencies and international bodies to ensure appreciation of Otago's distance education programme as being underpinned by the latest research, internationally accredited and compatible with their needs.

7. LEADERSHIP

Greater depth in distance education leadership within the University and a greater role in distance education leadership nationally.

STRATEGIES

- 7.1 Create opportunities for excellent distance teaching to be showcased to all University teaching staff
- 7.2 Support the active participation by staff in relevant professional distance education organisations and interest groups
- 7.3 Target national conferences and professional meetings for contributions by staff

INDICATORS

The following areas will provide baseline information about the Distance Education programme and serve as ongoing indicators of the level of successful implementation of this Strategy. They will be reported on annually to the Distance Learning Advisory Board.

Number of programmes offered at a distance that fully reflect the University's areas of specific expertise
Uptake of professional development activities by distance teaching staff
Number of applications for, and success in, funding from the Research into University Teaching Grant Fund related to distance teaching
Number of applications for, and success in, institutional and national tertiary teaching awards by distance teaching staff
Results of Student and Graduate Opinion Surveys
Findings of Course Evaluations of distance taught courses
Retention and pass rates of distance courses
Numbers of students and reflection in broader EFTS trends.

REVIEW CYCLE

The *Distance Education Strategy to 2020* will be supported by an annually-updated Distance Learning Office Action Plan. The Action Plan will focus on activities related to the seven goals of the Strategy.

PRIORITIES 2014-2016

1. **International** – Exploring and capitalising upon opportunities for engagement through distance programmes that are attractive to international and domestic students based outside New Zealand.
2. **Technologies** – Expanding and enhancing the innovative use of technologies for distance teaching and learning.
3. **Open Educational Resources (OERs)** – Exploring the incorporation, development and use of OERs in distance programmes.
4. **Practice-based education** – Exploring the unique contexts, challenges and opportunities of professionally-oriented distance education programmes.