

Distance Learning at the University of Otago – A History

The Distance Learning Programme of the University of Otago was established in the mid-1980's, and was administered by a central body, the Distance Teaching Unit, based in Scott and Shand Houses at the north end of the Quadrangle. Mr Peter McMechan, Director of University Extension, oversaw the beginnings of the Distance Learning Programme, with Dr Claire Matthewson as the first Head of the Unit.

In 1985, the first courses to run were what might be termed bridging courses, intended for older students who had missed an earlier opportunity to take up University study or who in retirement wished to advance earlier interests. The Diploma and Certificate courses in Humanities drew on the knowledge and teaching experience of academic staff in Languages, Classics, History, Geography, Literature, Art History, Music and other disciplines. Many Humanities students enjoyed these early courses so much that they then came to the University as full-time mature students to complete degrees.

Other early courses such as the Diploma and Certificate in Theological Studies also aimed at the mature student returning to study, and these evolved into today's Bachelor of Theology programme, still the only qualification available "at a distance" that leads to an undergraduate degree.

The Certificate in Social Work was the third main subject area for Distance students in the early days of the Distance Learning Programme, also an undergraduate qualification but one with a vocational direction.

A smaller programme offered postgraduate papers in Clinical Dentistry, a forerunner of the several postgraduate Health Sciences programmes that were to be developed over the next few years by the specialist Schools of the University, in particular, Medicine and Pharmacy. Medical Laboratory Science also used the audio-conference network to teach their fourth-year students based in Community Laboratories around the country.

The teaching was by "mixed media" - principally by audio-conference (at that time known as "teleconferencing"), utilising a custom-built regional network ("Unitel South") linking a number of venues in Otago and Southland. The technology was custom-designed and built by Jack Salmon and remains the basic hardware of the

system. The teleconference sessions were based on and supported by high quality and comprehensive course workbooks written by the teaching staff, incorporating essential Course Readings or Case Studies, and edited by specialist print editors within the Unit in a distinctive house style. The same emphasis on quality was notable in all the course materials produced - sets of replica teeth for the postgraduate Dental programme, kits of sample rocks and fossils for the Geology papers, audio-tapes of music for the Music papers. The quality assurance was possible because, unlike Massey's Centre for University Extramural Studies (CUES), the DTU held central oversight of materials production.

The University of Otago's Distance Learning Programme was differentiated from the extensive Massey University courses, first by the "live" teaching component made possible by the audio-conference network on which courses were based, and second by the emphasis on the high quality both of the courses offered and the support provided to students – a level of support only possible because of the lower number of enrolments in contrast to Massey's high numbers. Students attended residential courses in addition to their regular teleconference classes, which provided a "face to face" component to complement the audio-conference teaching.

The regional audio-conference network was also used for University Extension (non-credit) courses which tapped into community interests in a wide range of subjects, and provided a medium for the University to promote the concept of lifelong learning and professional development. Hitherto these community courses had relied on willing academics travelling to regional centres to teach a series of sessions in their areas of expertise. The audio-conference network enabled this community-based programme to expand and develop in the late 1980's and 1990's. The network was also widely used by non-University providers and agencies on an hourly rental basis for meetings and other networking functions.

With the success of the "mixed media" format, the Distance Learning Programme grew and the target of 1,000 credit enrolments within the 1985-1989 quinquennium was achieved.

The national audio-conference network ("Unitel New Zealand") was developed in 1987, enabling students in over 30 centres to link in for their teaching sessions. Main

sites comprised other tertiary institutions, hospitals nation-wide, and the University's Clinical Schools.

Further undergraduate programmes were developed to meet the needs of professional groups in the community. A good example is the Diploma and Certificate in Sports Studies programme, still one of the largest programmes today. Others continued to meet the community demand for interest-courses, as well as attracting teachers in the relevant subject area. Examples were the Geology courses which have today metamorphosed into "Earth and Ocean Science" and "Dynamic Earth", and the Biotechnology courses likewise aimed at Science teachers.

But increasingly the Distance Learning Programme was developing into a new area – postgraduate health sciences courses which allowed practitioners to update their knowledge and skills, or to add a specialised area of knowledge to their portfolio without leaving their home-base. These included Aviation Medicine, Musculoskeletal Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Pharmacy, and Child Health, and these have gone from strength to strength (with the sole exception of the postgraduate dental courses now discontinued), with many now teaching students overseas. Similarly in another health-related field, the Postgraduate Diploma in Dietetics enables selected Science or Consumer and Applied Science graduates in five New Zealand centres to train as dietitians.

The early '90's saw changes in personnel as well as growth in student numbers and development of new courses. In late 1989 Peter McMechan joined the Commonwealth of Learning based in Vancouver, Canada, and Don McKenzie succeeded him as Head of University Extension. Claire Matthewson left in early 1990 to become Director of University Extension at The University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, and Penny Love became Head of the Distance Teaching Unit.

Following Lorraine Isaacs' period of tenure as Director, University Extension's activities moved to be based in other University areas, foreshadowing later events. Following first the untimely death of Don McKenzie and then Penny Love's appointment as the University's Training and Development Adviser, Terry Hearn became Head of the Distance Teaching Unit. And in 1995 the Distance Teaching Unit

itself was disestablished with course administration for the Distance Learning Programme devolving to the teaching Departments.

On 25 October 1995 Senate agreed that a Distance Learning Committee be established to report directly to the Senate. Its Terms of Reference were as follows:

1. the promotion of the University of Otago as a centre for excellence in distance learning;
2. the recommendation of policies to coordinate and integrate distance learning initiatives throughout the University;
3. the oversight of the quality assurance of distance learning programmes provided by the University;
4. the facilitation of research into distance learning, both in general and specific to the University;
5. liaising with other centres / organisations responsible for the provision of distance learning;
6. consideration of any other matters relating to distance learning and teaching which might be referred to it by the Vice-Chancellor, the Senate or any Division.

It comprised a Convenor appointed by the Vice-Chancellor (Dr Rosemary Beresford, School of Pharmacy, fulfilled this role for the lifetime of the Committee), the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and International), Assistant Vice-Chancellors of the teaching Divisions (or their nominees), the Director, Information Services (or his nominee), the University Librarian (or his nominee), the Director, Higher Education Development Centre (or his nominee) and a student member. In fact, representatives of the four teaching Divisions attended on behalf of the Assistant Vice-Chancellors.

The Committee had the power to co-opt and generally met twice each semester, or as required, to consider policy and management issues. It also formulated the *University's Strategic Plan for Distance Learning (1998)*.

The Distance Learning Committee's first meeting was held on 20 February 1996. It was disestablished in 1999 and its last meeting was held on 24 February 1999. In March 1999, this Committee and the Committee on Teaching and Assessment were

replaced by the Committee for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) on which Dr Rosemary Beresford was appointed as the distance learning representative.

In late 2000, the Distance Learning Reference Group was set up as a sub-committee of the Senate Committee for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, reporting to CALT. The Distance Learning Reference Group held its first meeting on 21 November 2000. Its members are a Convenor (who is a member of CALT), the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) or his nominee, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research, Enterprise and International) or his nominee, the Director of Academic Services, the Director of HEDC or his nominee, and a representative of each of the teaching Divisions, nominated by each Assistant Vice-Chancellor. These Divisional representatives are people with an understanding of and experience in the delivery of Distance Learning.

Its Terms of Reference are as follows:

to promote the University of Otago as a centre for excellence in distance learning;
to recommend policies to coordinate and integrate distance learning initiatives throughout the University;

- to promote distance learning in Divisions and Departments;
- to promote distance learning as a means to further the University's commitment to internationalisation;
- to liaise with other centres and organisations responsible for the provision of distance learning;
- to recommend guidelines and provide advice to those responsible for the administration and technological support of distance learning on the academic dimensions of these facets of distance teaching;
- to assist Course Convenors with quality assurance issues, including managing feedback from students;
- to consider any other matters relating to distance learning and teaching which might be referred to it by CALT.

The Distance Learning Reference Group continues to carry out a central role incorporating discussion of policy, oversight and promotion of the University's Distance Learning Programme, and makes recommendations to CALT as appropriate.

Recent years have seen further new development within the Distance Learning Programme as the range and number of courses have continued to grow steadily if not spectacularly. Online teaching has replaced audio-conference teaching in papers offered by the Departments of Tourism, and Information Science (INFX411) in the Division of Commerce, and in the Chemical Hazard paper (HAZX401) offered by the Department of Chemistry in the Division of Sciences. But audio-conference teaching continues to underpin most programmes, with students in all but New Zealand's four main cities now linking in from their own telephone, rather than from designated centres. This technology was also substantially pioneered by the DTU's Jack Salmon in the 1980's to "patch in" small interest groups to the network. This development has provided greater flexibility and taken the University of Otago's Distance Learning Programme into more corners of New Zealand and the world.