

Papers - Day 1

Distance Education in Antigua – Past and Present Challenges

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Abstract

This paper begins by tracing, very briefly, the early beginnings of distance education in Antigua, concentrating mainly on the period from the 1977/78 academic year, when the University of the West Indies' "Challenge Scheme" was first introduced in Antigua, to the current year, 1999/2000. The challenges of delivering and administering distance education during this twenty-two year period are examined in three phases. The first describes and analyses the so-called "Challenge Scheme", whereby students in non-campus countries could "challenge" the university's examinations system by preparing for and sitting its examinations without the benefit of face-to-face lectures and tutorials. The second phase addresses the positive outcomes as well as the problems of the delivery of distance education via the teleconferencing mode of UWIDITE (now UWIDEC). The third and final phase is the current one where teleconferencing to distance learners has been greatly reduced and students are being encouraged to take a greater responsibility for their own learning, using instructional materials and packages that allow them to study and learn more on their own.

Throughout, an attempt is made to discuss, albeit briefly, a number of pertinent issues, such as the gender imbalance in the distribution of distance learners in UWI programmes sourced in Antigua. In discussing current problems faced by distance learners, the author introduces the concept of "the culture of learning" in the Caribbean – a culture that makes it difficult for most of our students to become independent learners. In closing, the author concludes that UWI has to be innovative and proactive in meeting the needs of its constituents for more and varied distance education programmes.

Introduction

One of the earliest examples of distance education in Antigua took the form of correspondence courses offered through academic agencies such

as Wolsey Hall, Oxford. It was not unusual for students preparing for the Cambridge Higher School Certificate in the 1940s, '50s and even the early '60s, to supplement their formal instruction

in school by taking one or two correspondence courses in particular subjects. The most common format of such courses was to supply the students with packages containing reading material, notes and questions on various topics. The students would be expected to study the material provided and answer the questions. The latter would then be sent for marking and the marked scripts subsequently returned to the student with grades and comments. Through such means as well, students in the former British territories in the Caribbean and elsewhere prepared and sat for University of London examinations as external candidates. These early excursions into distance learning, though significant, were nothing to compare to the tremendous possibilities for academic advancement opened up by the inauguration of the University of the West Indies Challenge Examinations Scheme in the 1977/78 academic year. It is to this liberating, distance education experiment – one that truly marks the beginning of serious distance education scholarship in Antigua – that this paper now turns.

Phase 1 – The “Challenge” Years, 1977–1984

The Extra Mural Department (now the School of Continuing Studies) of the University of the West Indies (UWI) started at the same time as the university, in 1948. The founders of the UWI were visionaries who understood clearly that all the territories that were members of the then University College of the West Indies (UCWI) constituted its pool of potential students and thus were vital to its very existence. They had to have unimpeded access to its resources and, though physically removed from the campus in Jamaica, they still needed to bask in its intellectual climate. In a 1963 conference on Extra Mural work, it was recognized that the UWI needed a physical symbol of its presence in each territory. Thus was born the University Centres, each one headed by a

resident tutor. The one in Antigua was the first to be established in 1967.¹

In the early years of the existence of the Antigua University Centre, its academic focus was mainly on preparing adult candidates for the Cambridge and London Ordinary and Advanced Level Certificates Examinations. This it did most successfully, as it proudly recorded in a magazine published in celebration of its tenth anniversary. Some forty-two participants in its programmes, who had gone on to earn degrees or were enrolled in degree programmes at various universities, were duly acknowledged in its pages.²

Such successes did not go unnoticed. In the 1977/78 academic year, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Mona campus instituted the Challenge Examination Scheme whereby students could “challenge” the system by preparing and sitting for UWI examinations without the benefit of face-to-face teaching from lecturers on the campus. Much of the credit for this must go to the dynamic Dr Fred Nunes of that faculty, “who travelled from island to island cajoling and urging Resident Tutors and prospective students to take up the challenge.”³ The faculty made it abundantly clear, however, that they could not offer any financial assistance, neither could they be held responsible for the success or failure of the students. This was, in essence, the Challenge Examination Scheme or simply, “Challenge,” as its participants soon dubbed it. The response in Antigua to the possibility of starting a degree programme at a distance was tremendous. In a minimum of two years, studying part-time, students could complete the first part (the first year) of the degree programme in the Social Sciences. (Later on, Arts and General Studies programmes were added, but the Antigua University Centre was never able to take advantage of these). Requiring only five credits (including English) at the GCE “O” Level or the Senior Cambridge Certificate Level, twenty-seven “mature

students” registered to pursue the first year of the BSc Social Sciences degree.⁴ Enrolment was fairly evenly distributed by gender. There were 14 males and 13 females, 52 percent and 48 percent, respectively. However, as is demonstrated in Table 1, gender parity in enrolment in university level courses at the University Centre in Antigua (and elsewhere it may be added) did not last long. Three years later, in the 1980/81 session, the percentage enrolment by gender began to show a marked disparity in favour of females, 55 percent to 45 percent – a disparity that has increased greatly over the years. (Refer to Table 1.)

The majority of those first students taking advantage of the Challenge Scheme were teachers – nine or 33 percent of the twenty-seven. There were also six civil servants, three accountants, two bank clerks, one airline pilot, one manager of a private business and two unemployed persons. The occupations of the other three were not recorded. One of those very first students – a teacher, Cynthia Joseph – made history by becoming the first “Challenge” student to complete the first year of the BSc Social Sciences degree.⁵

From the records, it appears that attrition rates in the early years of Challenge were quite high, with those for males consistently higher than those for females. For the earliest year for which complete statistics are available, that is, the 1981/82 session (four years after Challenge had started), of the twenty-two persons who registered for the course Introduction to Economics in September/October 1981, only twelve persons actually sat for the examination in the following year. This means that almost half of the economics class – 45 percent – dropped out of the course. (Statistics in Table 1 indicate that those registered for the course in Economics constituted the entire enrolment for that year.) Significantly, most of those who dropped out were male. Of the twenty-two

persons registered at the beginning of the year, eight or 36 percent were male and fourteen or 64 percent were female. But of the twelve persons taking the final examination, only two were male, indicating an attrition rate for males of 75 percent, whereas the attrition rate for females was only 14 percent. Similarly, in the same year, for the course Introduction to Accounting, ten males and twelve females (twenty-two persons in all) were registered at the beginning of the course in September 1981, but only four males and eight females (54 percent) were still attending classes in January of 1982. Thus, some four months before the examination, the attrition rate for the Accounting class was 46 percent, a figure very close to the 45 percent for the Economics class. When the attrition rates for the Accounting class are examined by gender, they also show a higher attrition rate for males than females – 60 percent to 33 percent.

To attempt to account for the disparity that soon emerged in enrolment by gender in distance education programmes at the University Centre in Antigua and the corresponding trend of higher attrition rates for males than females, is not an easy task. One plausible explanation is that, after the first introductory year or two, women began to see the liberating possibilities of being able to stay in their home country and start to study towards a degree. By completing at least Part 1 of the degree programme at home, they could reduce, by at least one year, the amount of time they would have to spend away from their families. Why, then, did more men drop out than women? Perhaps, having tasted higher education, the men dropped out of the distance education mode to pursue studies abroad in face-to-face programmes. It may be possible, in a future study, to trace some of the males who dropped out of the Challenge programme and have them explain just why they abandoned the programme. But then again, it is possible that they did not need the degree as much

as women to advance their careers. In a 1996 study of women in management in Antigua and Barbuda, Osoba discovered that in the civil service, women took significantly longer to rise to the rank of permanent secretary than their male counterparts. It could be, though, that males started out with higher qualifications than women, for the study showed that there were proportionally more male than female permanent secretaries with degrees.⁶

The year 1983/84 saw the introduction of two additional distance education programmes under the Challenge Examination Scheme - the Certificate in Public Administration (CPA) and Part 1 of the LLB degree. The CPA programme was undertaken as a joint venture with the Training Division of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and this arrangement continues to the present. The Training Division selects those public servants it sees fit to train, subject to their gaining admission to the programme. The Government of Antigua then pays the fees of those candidates who are admitted to the programme.

The success of the Challenge programme over the years is hard to measure. Mere numbers of graduates do not tell the story of lives significantly changed for the better because of the opportunities for academic advancement that it offered large segments of the local community. But many of the students would not have survived were it not for the system of local tutoring that was put in place from the outset. Resident tutors throughout the noncampus countries very quickly realized at the inception of Challenge that their students needed help to “challenge” the examinations system. In Antigua, the response to their call for lecturers and tutors was most heartening. Many public servants and those in private businesses gave of their time, energy and knowledge for very little remuneration. Local tutors were, and still are, notoriously underpaid for the sterling contribution they make to the

academic life of University Centres. As was stated in the Antigua University Centre’s magazine celebrating the 40th anniversary of UWI, “the success of the Challenge Programme owes a great deal to the dedication of the early tutors, many of whom are still with us.”⁷ The article goes on to give credit also to the early students, “who developed ways of sharing resources and the personal skills which each of them had.”⁸ This is a coping and learning strategy that all of us would like to see developed more fully among distance education learners.

Phase 2 – The UWIDITE Years, 1984–1996

The University Centre in Antigua joined the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE) in the academic year 1984/85. This teleconferencing system began as a mode of delivery of some courses in university level programmes. Just how the UWIDITE system works from a technical point of view has been described elsewhere by those competent to do so.⁹ However, from the standpoint of the participants in the system, the general practice in the early years was that faculty who lectured in the various courses offered via the system, went on line to deliver their lectures to students. The students from the noncampus territories and those inter-mural sites that were linked into the UWIDITE teleconferencing system gathered in specially equipped rooms at a site in each location. Lecturers could deliver their lectures from one of the campuses located in Jamaica, Trinidad or Barbados or even from one of the local sites where the system was in place.¹⁰ The teleconferencing was (and still is, where it is used) interactive. Students were encouraged to come prepared to ask questions of the lecturers. Over time, course outlines, lecture notes, various reading materials, course manuals and study guides became part of the print packages given to the distance education students.

The introduction of UWIDITE greatly enhanced the delivery of distance education in the region. Students in the Challenge system gained in confidence as they interacted verbally with lecturers via the system. In some, but not all, instances the “UWIDITE lecturers” were also the lecturers who taught the on-campus students in the face-to-face mode. Thus, even though contact was limited, Challenge students no longer felt that they were absolutely at a disadvantage by not knowing their lecturers personally. Again, over time, the practice arose whereby for some courses, the lecturers made periodic visits to noncampus countries, especially around the time of preparation for the examinations. Students appreciated this very much as they felt they were getting clues and hints “from the horses’ mouths” so to speak.

As well as UWIDITE lectures, local tutoring continued to be of crucial importance to the success of the Challenge system. Indeed, some noncampus countries chose not to take advantage of the UWIDITE lectures in some courses as students were required to pay additional fees for lectures coming to them via the teleconferencing network. The practice of having the right to choose whether or not to participate in the UWIDITE mode of delivery (with some students electing not to do so), gave rise to some confusion in naming distance education students as “UWIDITE students” and “Challenge students” interchangeably or in some cases, severally. Correctly speaking, all distance education students – up to the time of the formal recognition of UWI as a dual mode university in 1996 with the setting up of a Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education – were “Challenge” students. UWIDITE simply refers to a specific mode of delivery.

In the 1987/88 session, the Certificate in Business Administration Programme (CBA) was added to

those already in existence. Enrolment figures were thereby boosted as this programme attracted a new cadre of participants from the business community though not exclusively so. Of a total registration of sixty persons in UWI programmes, eighteen or 30 percent were registered to do the new CBA programme.

It is useful to mention briefly here, that some courses designed to meet local needs, such as the Administrative Professional Secretaries Certificate Programme which started in 1986, act as feeder programmes for university level ones.¹¹ Many of our students have used their success in the Administrative Professional Secretaries Certificate Programme (recognized by the Faculty of Social Sciences), to meet matriculation requirements for other certificate programmes such as the CPA and the CBA.

Other categories of distance learners also used the UWIDITE system. Short refresher courses for medical doctors, nurses, trade unionists and others were organized from time to time by various faculties on the campuses.¹² A series of lectures for sixth formers throughout the region has been going on for many years. Thus, UWIDITE has played a very vital role in the continuing education of our people, some of whom, by making use of its technology, have managed to access intellectual resources at a distance.

But as useful and successful a tool in the delivery of distance education as it has been, the UWIDITE system of delivery has had more than its fair share of problems. Sometimes, because of technical faults or power outages, the system has failed to work. But the major problem that plagued the system from the outset (and still does in those instances where it is still used for teaching), is the poor performance of some faculty in delivering lectures promptly and efficiently. Lecturers have been known to cancel at short notice or to give

none at all. This type of behaviour is very inconsiderate of students' time and energy as they waste both by turning up for lectures that do not happen. Perhaps there is no greater cause of damage to the university's image in the noncampus countries than this insensitive disregard of the welfare of an important constituent part of the university.

The distance education mode, in general, as it operated in the period being considered, also suffered from the logistical problem of moving large and varied quantities of materials from the campus in Jamaica to the noncampus and intramural sites at a distance over water and land. On many occasions, it has failed to do so in an orderly and timely fashion. Some of these problems have been tackled aggressively but much remains to be done to ensure that distance learning is a pleasurable not a painful experience.

Table 1 gives the enrolment by gender in UWI programmes undertaken in the period 1977 to the present. In the specific period under review, 1984–1996, it is patently obvious that women far outnumber men as distance education students at the University Centre in Antigua. (Even before the watershed year, 1984/85, when UWIDITE was started, the percentage enrolment of females had been steadily increasing over that of males.) In 1984/85, only 35 percent of the enrolment in all programmes were male, compared to a figure of 65 percent for females. Gender disparity in enrolment continued to escalate during the period under review, with as high a figure of 89 percent for female enrolment, compared to just 11 percent for males, in the 1995/96 session.

Table 1 • Percentage Enrolment by Gender in all UWI Distance Education Programmes Available at the University Centre, Antigua for the years 1977/78–1999/2000

Year	Male	Female	Total	% Male	% Female
1977/78 ^a	14	13	27	52	48
1978/79	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1979/80	N/A	N/A	22	N/A	N/A
1980/81	17	21	38	45	55
1981/82	10	12	22	45	55
1982/83	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1983/84 ^b	11	17	28	39	61
1984/85 ^c	14	26	40	35	65
1985/86	N/A	N/A	36	N/A	N/A
1986/87	13	35	48	27	73
1987/88 ^d	21	39	60	35	65
1988/89	6	39	45	27	73
1989/90	14	39	53	26	74
1990/91	20	35	55	34	66
1991/92	14	40	54	26	74
1992/93	19	39	58	33	67
1993/94	12	32	44	28	72
1994/95	8	44	52	15	85
1995/96	7	59	66	11	89
1996/97 ^e	4	56	60	7	93
1997/98 ^f	9	73	82	11	89
1998/99	5	82	87	6	94
1999/2000	11	88	99	11	89

N/A Not available.

a The year that the "Challenge Examination" started.

b The year that the Certificate in Public Administration (CPA) and LLB (Part I) Programmes started.

c UWIDITE teleconferencing began in this year.

d The year that the Certificate in Business Administration (CBA) Programme started.

e The year that UWI formally became a dual mode institution.

f The year that the BSc Degree Programme in Management Studies started to be fully operational at a distance.

Source: Registration Records, Class Records and Annual Reports of the University Centre, Antigua, 1977 to present.

Phase 3 – The Formal Recognition of Distance Education, 1996 to the Present

The University of the West Indies has been fulfilling its mission to meet “critical regional needs” by “high quality teaching and research”¹³ through two modes of delivery of its programmes. First, the traditional, face-to-face mode that it used from its inception in 1948, and later, the distance education mode of the Challenge system started in 1977. However, formal recognition of its status as a dual mode university did not come about until 1996 when the Board for Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education was instituted through Statute 21C. At about the same time, Distance Education Centres were established on all three campuses with technical and administrative staff on hand to deliver distance education throughout the member states of the UWI. The inauguration of the Board and the setting up of Distance Education Centres sent a strong message to all the players involved in the distance education mode of delivery that the university was fully committed to distance education. This comment had to be made because it has been the experience of the resident tutors, who constitute the first line of attack by distance students when anything goes wrong, that the faculty on the campuses have generally not been as supportive of distance education as they ought to be. The model of distance education in UWI is a faculty-driven one: members of faculty have full responsibility for the content and examination of the courses that are offered through the distance mode. However, for various reasons, too complex to be dealt with here, some members of faculty have been tardy in preparing suitable material for the print packages.

As distance education becomes increasingly recognized as being critical to the actualization of the university’s commitment to the region as a whole, more programmes and course offerings are being steadily introduced. In the 1997/98 session, students were allowed to register for BSc degrees in Management Studies, Agri-Business

Management and Construction Management, all courses to be done part-time through the distance mode. Although it will take a minimum of five years (six years if there are no exemptions) to complete each of the programmes, once again, a significant number of students seized the opportunity to stay at home and study.

In Antigua, the increase in programme offerings was clearly reflected in a corresponding increase in enrolment statistics. Going back to Table 1, it can be observed that from an overall enrolment of sixty persons in 1996/97, there was a dramatic upswing in the next year to eighty-two persons, a percentage increase of approximately 37 percent. Sixteen persons applied to do Management Studies; fourteen of them were admitted, all female but one. Similarly, the next year, twenty-six applications were received, eleven were admitted, ten of them female. Only one person, a female, applied and was admitted in 1998/89 to do Agri-Business Management. This current year, 1999/00, the same trend continues: the Management Studies class is overwhelmingly female. Of the thirty-two new students in the programme, twenty-eight are female. With these statistics in mind, it is not surprising, therefore, that the typical distance education student at the University Centre in Antigua is female, a working mother and aged 35 or so.

Today, a student, on average, takes three to three and one half years to complete the CPA, the CBA and Part 1 (the first year) of the BSc degree programmes. Attrition rates have been greatly reduced over the years, with the majority of students completing the programmes they registered for. Now when students leave, the reasons for doing so are seldom academic. Very few students are asked by the faculty to withdraw, or leave because they think that they cannot cope with the coursework. When they do leave, it is usually because of health problems or sudden

changes in their circumstances such as the death of a close relative, the loss of a job or some other personal reason. In instances of this nature, they most often take an official leave of absence for a year or two and then return to their studies.

This paper cannot be concluded without some discussion, albeit a cursory one, of some of the problems with learning at a distance that plague Caribbean students. First, at all levels of the educational system, Caribbean students are being nurtured in a “culture of learning” that is still, to a large extent, very traditional.¹⁴ By this is meant that students tend to be passive recipients of knowledge and skills imparted to them by someone considered more expert than they. Thus, there is generally an overwhelming need for a teacher; there is little emphasis on self-learning.¹⁵

It has been the experience of resident tutors throughout the noncampus territories that their distance education students are very dependent emotionally on the use of a tutor. Even in instances where the course is designed to be self-instructional, as much of the distance education material now is, students still “crave” and plead for tutorial support. Similarly, they are generally dissatisfied with the new trend in teleconferencing adopted by the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC, no longer UWIDITE). The system is now used, not so much to teach or instruct, but to monitor the students’ progress in following the material in the print packages they are given for each course and to iron out any administrative difficulties they may be experiencing with the delivery of the course. (There are exceptions to this: some courses, for example those in the new Bachelor in Education degree programme started in this current academic year, 1999/00, are still heavily dependent on lectures delivered by faculty on the Mona campus.) It should be noted that for all programmes, local tutorials are still offered by

university-approved local tutors, but the number of tutorials per course has been reduced in proportion to the amount of self-instructional materials made available to students.

A second critical problem for distance learners in Antigua and other noncampus territories is the lack of adequate library facilities. The point has been made very cogently – and with great urgency for a solution to be found – by the resident tutor of the University Centre in Grenada in at least two published articles.¹⁶ The libraries at the University Centres are stocked only with the required textbooks and some limited reference books. Students complain often of the lack of relevant material to do additional research. Their complaints are indeed justified, but in many instances, local tutors find that their students do not do even the required reading. They come to tutorials expecting to be lectured to or told exactly how to answer a particular question. Again this problem stems from the way our students have been socialized to learn.

For distance education to truly become a process in which students take responsibility for their learning, our culture of learning has to change. Happily there are signs of change. Even at the lower levels of the educational system, in primary and secondary schools, students are being encouraged to do independent individual research and group projects. At the university level, our distance education students are being told time and time again that they must take more and more responsibility for their own learning. The message is getting through, if for no other reason than that the tutorial support system has been severely curtailed. A positive outcome of this is that we are seeing more study groups springing up. It is certainly a most healthy trend to observe adults cooperating with each other in the learning process.

Finally, it is necessary to note very briefly that UWI now has serious competitors in the field of distance education. Apart from those persons, still relatively few, who are enrolled in university level programmes offered by some academic agencies via the Internet, several universities, both in the United Kingdom and the USA, are canvassing heavily to recruit Antiguan and other Caribbean students into their distance education programmes. This author did not have the time to research the numbers involved in such programmes because such statistics are not routinely collected, but has been reliably informed by a participant that there are ten or eleven teachers currently enrolled in a distance education “bridging course” of Nottingham University. They contract to engage in preliminary coursework – “the bridge” – for one year to bring them up to the desired academic level. If successful, they will then be able to enter Nottingham University to read for a Bachelor’s degree in Education. UWI must make similar programmes available as well as those at the Master’s degree level, as it is at this level that we receive most of our queries about the possibility of studying in particular fields at a distance. UWI must also design more innovative and attractive ones at lower levels if it is to retain, at least, its regional pre-eminence in distance education.

Notes

1. Edris Bird, a former resident tutor noted this in her article, “The Antigua University Centre - 1967-1977,” in *The 10th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine, 1967-1977*, Antigua University Centre, St. John’s, Antigua, Dec. 1977.
2. Ibid., pages 12 and 13.
3. See “The Programmes of the University Centre (1977-1989)” in *The University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Studies 40th Anniversary Magazine*, Antigua University Centre, St. John’s, Antigua, Dec. 1989, p.14.
4. UWI has a “mature students” clause whereby adults (aged 25 and over) who do not meet the normal matriculation requirements can enter with lower qualifications.
5. See, “The Programmes of the University Centre (1977-1989),” p.14.
6. The author discovered this in her research into women in management in Antigua and Barbuda in 1996. However, this particular point was not mentioned in her unpublished paper entitled, “Women in Management in Antigua and Barbuda - A Preliminary Statistical Analysis.” Paper presented at a Management Workshop for Women organized by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Directorate of Women’s Affairs, Antigua and Barbuda, held at Perry Bay, Sept. 23-27, 1996.
7. See, “The Programmes of the University Centre (1977-1989),” p.14.
8. Ibid.
9. For a comprehensive discussion of UWIDITE, see G.C. Lalor and C. Marrett, *Report on the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE)*, Senate House, UWI, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica, Nov. 1986.
10. Y. Bayrd, “UWIDITE Comes to Antigua and Barbuda,” in *The University of the West Indies, School of Continuing Studies 40th Anniversary Magazine*, Dec. 1989, p. 23.
11. This programme was modelled on one offered at the School of Continuing Studies in Barbados.
12. Bayrd, “UWIDITE Comes to Antigua and Barbuda,” p. 23.
13. Part of the Mission Statement of the University of the West Indies.
14. This is a concept that the author wishes to develop further in a later work.

15. A. Rogers, *Teaching Adults*, p. 78. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1996.
16. See Beverley Steele, "The University's Unique Constituency: The Non-Campus Countries," *Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs* 18, no. 4 (1993), pp. 32-50; and "Library Services for the University of the West Indies Distance Students," in *Library Services to Distance Learners in the Commonwealth: A Reader*, pp. 71-82, edited by E. Watson and N. Jagannathan. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning, 1996.