

Chapter 4

Distance Learning Challenges Facing Two World Regional Universities

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ABSTRACT

The University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific are the only two regional universities in the world. Together they serve 29 small island nations spread over nearly 35 percent of the Earth's surface. Many of these developing countries lack the educational resources to provide the educational access to develop strong economies and improve social conditions. Until recently, regional campuses and correspondence courses were the primary means of course delivery due to isolation and small population sizes. However, improved Internet access at a time of increased shipping and travel costs now makes Transnational Distance Learning (TDL) increasingly attractive. TDL is defined as online learning delivered to students in other countries or even other continents. TDL holds the promise of improving educational access, but there are challenges. This chapter discusses the distance-learning history, current practices, and future directions of these two regional universities. The chapter also discusses opportunities, competition from foreign universities, political issues that impact regional universities, and cultural/pedagogical challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The University of the West Indies and University of South Pacific

The combined service areas of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the University of the South Pacific (USP) include nearly 35 percent

of the Earth's surface. Table 1 lists the countries served by the two universities. The service area of the UWI extends across the Caribbean Sea, which is one of the largest salt-water seas, with an area more than 1 million square miles. The Caribbean Sea is home to 22 islands and borders 12 continental countries. The islands that comprise the Caribbean have a land area of 92.5 thousand

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square miles and a total population of 36.3 million. The populations on the English-speaking islands range from a high of 2.7 million in Jamaica to a low of just over 14 thousand in Anguilla. The isolation and small populations of some countries make it a challenge to accommodate their need for higher education.

Tewarie (2009b) described the historical development of the UWI, which was founded in 1948 as the University College of the West Indies and was located in Mona, Jamaica. Since its origin, the UWI has since grown to three main campuses located in Mona (Jamaica), Cave Hill (Barbados), and St. Augustine (Trinidad and Tobago), 29 regional campuses, and most recently the Open Campus. The Open Campus delivers transnational online distance learning to better serve the 16-member Caribbean countries. The Open Campus, which increases educational access and convenience, includes the School of Continuing Studies, and the Tertiary Level Institutions Unit. The Open Campus has the same governance structure as the physical campuses.

The University of the West Indies has expanded to meet the growing need for education throughout the Caribbean. The current total enrollment in 2009-10 of 46,440 students and approximately

9,000 graduates at the undergraduate, graduate, certificate, and diploma levels represents an increase of 61 percent in graduates when compared to 2001.

Despite the UWI move toward diversity, students continue to be concentrated on three campuses according to country of residence. In 1998, 93,550 students from Caribbean countries were studying at tertiary level programmes, with 80 percent studying in their own country, 2 percent from other Caribbean countries, and 18 percent from non-regional countries. Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago were the two countries with the highest number of non-regional students.

In recent times, these figures have altered, perhaps due in part to the policy initiatives of regional governments, the Open Campus, and the proliferation of online degrees from foreign transnational universities. The 2009-10 enrollment figures indicate that 88 percent of the student body at the Cave Hill and Mona Campuses are from Barbados and Jamaica respectively, and in the case of the St. Augustine campus over 92 percent of the students are from Trinidad and Tobago. A further disaggregation in the case of the St. Augustine campus shows that 5 percent of the students are

Table 1. University campuses (UWI also has a virtual open campus)

University	Main Campus	Regional Campuses		Open Campus
UWI	Mona, Jamaica Cave Hill, Barbados St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago	Trinidad and Tobago Jamaica Barbados		Anguilla Antigua and Barbuda Bahamas Barbados Belize British Virgin Islands Cayman Is Dominica Grenada Guyana Jamaica Montserrat St. Kitts & Nevis St. Lucia St. Vincent Trinidad & Tobago Turks and Caicos
USP	Suva, Fiji	Cook Is Kiribati Marshall Is Nauru Niue	Samoa Solomon Is Tonga Vanuatu Tokelau	

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