Chapter 1.13
The Evolution of Virtual Universities

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries universities have worked as individual entities in isolation, and students have attended classes their respective campuses. In the 70s Open University started its operation as the first virtual university. It was not until the late 80s and 90s that some traditional universities started having affiliations with offshore facilities for students to study the first year of their degrees in their home countries before moving overseas to complete the rest of their degrees. This globalisation was the beginning of knowledge commercialisation as universities set up arrangements with rapidly emerging offshore institutions that were eager to jump onto this profitable bandwagon. Eventually

competition drove some universities to extend the time spent in the students' home countries to a second year, which sent students flocking to their door away from non-conforming universities. The lower overseas student numbers at these universities forced them to discontinue their affiliations, as they were no longer viable. Online distance education and later the Internet opened new challenges as students could enroll directly with the university of their choice and do their whole degree from home. This also gives the less wealthy students an opportunity to study at the world's top universities most of which have no entry requirements. Lots of universities around the world have joined to form consortiums to handle this rapid change in global education commercialisation.

OPEN UNIVERSITY (UK)

Open University is the world's leading e-university and has been in operation in the UK since taking in their first student enrollments in 1971 and could probably be termed the first virtual university due to its lack of campuses (www.open.ac.uk). This "University of the Air" was a serious, well planned adult education degree programme aimed at rectifying the exclusion from higher education of the lower socio-economic groups in the UK without any lowering of standards. Initially lectures were broadcast on the BBC TV, typically at 7:05-7:30 a.m. weekdays and repeated Saturday mornings. These lectures were supplemented with texts and periodic visits to conventional universities typically living in residence for a week or two in student accommodation during university holiday periods. There were also appointed tutors based at 13 regional centres across the UK. Many tutors are themselves Open University graduates so understand what it is like studying from a distance. Each tutor is given a few students to support. In the 80s teleconferencing meant several students could talk to their tutor simultaneously via telephone. Nowadays students can physically attend tutorials, or join a self-help study group, or join in to an online conference.

In the early 1980s over 70,000 students were enrolled and 6,000 were graduating per year, its business school had become the largest in Europe. The 90s saw expansion of their operations worldwide and the increase in popularity of their lectures and documentaries to the point that they were screened as peak-time broadcasts on BBC TV, they were watched by millions and won critical acclaim. Nowadays, 180,000 students are enrolled with 20,000 at the postgraduate level.

Since its inception, innovative teaching methods were adopted as new technologies became available—audiocassettes, videocassettes, and personal computers in the 80s and the Web in the 90s. The Internet has given students the capability of doing just about everything online, they can view their academic records, access library facilities, download lecture material, meet other students in chat rooms, and hold conferences.

OFFSHORE CAMPUSES

In the 90s universities started to expand their operations into offshore campuses that allowed overseas students to complete an initial period of their degrees while staying at home. This not only saved them the living expenses involved but also allowed them to get to know other students with the same destination. They then moved overseas to complete their degree. The entry requirements into these programs were usually the same as the hosting institution, so students in Kuala Lumpur, for example, were studying and sitting the entrance exams for attending Canadian, UK, and Australian universities. When successful they continued into their first period of university study at the same offshore institution. Initially only the first year of study was possible, but since this was so successful financially the competition became fierce as more universities joined in. After a few years some universities began to offer two years offshore to make themselves more attractive. The universities that stuck to only the first year were forced to drop out of the system due to a lack of student demand. It was just a matter of time until competition and demand made it possible for students to complete their degrees without ever having to set foot in the onshore campus at all. These offshore practises had little impact on their overall student population as local student numbers tended to remain constant. For example, one of the larger universities offering such facilities is the Nova Southeastern University, Florida (www.nova.edu). NSU educates 22,000 (82%) local students from their main campus, while the others are educated at "offshore" campuses in surrounding counties, and international campuses based in the Caribbean, UK, Canada, Greece, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico.

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