# Chapter 17
# Navigating a Pathway to Partnership through Turbulent Seas of Adversity

**Paul Breen**
*INTO University of East Anglia, UK*

**Magdalena De Stefani**
*Instituto Cultural Anglo-Uruguayo, Uruguay*

**Achilleas Kostoulas**
*Technological Educational Institute of Epirus, Greece*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This chapter will endeavour to provide a rich description and detailed analysis of how an institution, in the British higher educational sector, has designed and provided a course of in-context doctoral study. The institution described in this chapter is a redbrick university situated in the north of England. The purpose of this chapter is not to cover the broad spectrum of higher education courses provided by distance means but rather to take one particular case as an illustration of how institutions can adapt and indeed need to adapt to the nature of society and education in the twenty first century.*

*Many adult professionals no longer have the time or finances to engage in full time, on site study, and as a consequence are seeking flexible alternatives. Some institutions have been slow to react to this change. The organisation described herein has been quicker to react but this movement towards change also poses its own unique issues. These issues are discussed and analysed by three students who have participated in a part-time programme of doctoral studies while embedded in their research context. But, one of the drawbacks of conducting a study such as this though is the contemporary lack of statistics on the actual dichotomy of provision between conventional and alternative modes of teaching in the higher education sector. The reason for this is that higher education organisations in Britain operate in a competitive and individualised manner rather than as a cohesive block.*

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## ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Aside from a few ancient universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, the British higher educational sector itself can be divided into three main categories; 'red brick universities' formed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, 'plate glass universities' established in the 1960s, and 'new universities' created in the 1990s through an upgrading of the former Polytechnics to full university status. In total there are 166 Higher Education institutions in the United Kingdom, of which 116 are classified as universities (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2009).

Although the education of teachers by distance means is hardly radical in itself, it could be argued that very few redbrick institutions have ventured so far as to provide studies at this level in a format that diverges significantly from traditional modes of delivery. This is not to say that there are no courses of high quality being delivered by a number of progressive British universities, exclusively by distance means. Rather, the amount and significance of these courses is limited at the present time and largely restricted in the number of participants. Those universities that have embraced distance courses are still fighting battles, often from within, to have them recognised as equal partners in terms of educational quality but in fighting such a battle, these organisations and the individuals at the forefront of such initiatives have placed themselves resolutely within the domain of modernity.

In this high tech age, if institutions are to remain at the forefront of innovation there is a need to meet the requirements and expectations of the society in which they operate. Today's digitally literate, globalised society has facilitated interaction on a scale unimaginable in times past. Organisations that survive in the new economic and socio-cultural milieu of British higher education, in the twenty first century, need to adapt and come up with radical programmes of study that lose none of their traditional pedagogic values but at the same time are versatile enough to meet the demands of a society that, for better or worse, is becoming increasingly corporate.

Degrees provided by distance are neither a new phenomenon nor a product of the digital age, either in the United Kingdom or overseas, and are often the source of considerable debate amongst educators and institutions, for both academic and economic reasons. Valentine (2002, p. 1) explains how distance learning courses have existed in the European context for over one hundred years. These original correspondence-style courses gradually evolved to incorporate audio and video formats in the middle of the century (ibid) before the advent of Web technologies in subsequent decades. Jim Taylor (2001, p. 12) asserts that educators have now reached a fifth generation mode of educational delivery by distance means, which is based around "the intelligent flexible learning model" (ibid). One of the chief affordances of these fifth, and even sixth, generation distance education courses is that they facilitate a transparent exchange of ideas and good practice within the university teaching profession as advocated by Laurillard and Mc Andrew (2002, p. 5). The reason for needing this open exchange of ideas and analysis is that the contemporary proliferation of distance degree courses has caused some scepticism about the benefits of distance education and the accreditation or value for money learning experience that it offers.

This undercurrent of scepticism featured strongly in the All-Africa Ministers' Conference of 2004 where Badat (2004, p. 2) made the assertion that in certain scenarios "developments may well be driven by technologists and business interests rather than by educators" with corporate representatives at the top of the hierarchical pyramid and teachers in a position of struggle at the bottom in what White (2003, p. 45) terms "a bifurcated system."