

***Building Appropriate Distance
Education Options
from the Ground Up***

***A case study of the University of Technology,
Jamaica's progress toward dual modalities for
course and programme offerings***

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1.0 Background: Viewing the UTech landscape

The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech), accorded university status in 1995 and chartered in June, 1999, is the first publicly funded university in the country and the only technical university¹ in the English-speaking Caribbean. It began its institutional life in 1958 and operated as the College of Arts Science and Technology (C.A.S.T.) for almost 40 years prior to its transformation into its present incarnation. In 1986, the Jamaican government authorised C.A.S.T. to offer post-Diploma Bachelor's degrees, and up to the time that it was granted full University status, the institution had developed a total of 10 undergraduate degrees and one Master's programme.

Still in transition from its college identity, the University continues to offer a number of certificate and diploma level courses; however, over the past three years it has begun the process of divesting these programmes to community colleges and, in their place, has introduced 24 new full-time Bachelor's degree programmes, a postgraduate Diploma and four taught Master's degrees as well as enrolling M. Phil and Ph.D. candidates. UTech's first M.Phil candidate graduated in 2001 and the second completed his studies for graduation in 2002. UTech has graduated successful candidates from its Masters of Architecture programme in its Caribbean School of Architecture for the past six years.

In Academic Year 2001-02, UTech enrolled almost 8,000 students in full time and part time studies on its main campus and in outreach and franchise centres around the country.

¹ The importance of science and technology in Jamaica's national development plan is emphasised by the fact that its first national university is a University of Technology.

The University has already become a significant force in the English-speaking Caribbean, whose programmes are in high demand in the region.

2.0 First initiatives: laying the foundation for distance education at The University of Technology, Jamaica

Although it is a national university, UTech also takes its regional responsibilities seriously because of its unique focus and mandate in the English-speaking Caribbean. Therefore, UTech has identified distance modalities as the means of achieving its regional responsibilities and offering more access to its programmes.

Some early initiatives carried over from its days as C.A.S.T.; however, UTech has expanded and further developed the franchising of the first years of programmes to other tertiary institutions in the country to increase access at a reasonable cost. Franchises of UTech programmes work on a McDonald's model: recognised tertiary institutions offer UTech-designed courses using instructors whose academic credentials will allow the courses to be accredited within UTech's accreditation process. UTech staff monitor the delivery, prepare coursework testing and assessment in collaboration with the franchise institutions and moderate examination results. These students, even though attending classes at another tertiary institution, are enrolled as UTech students; upon completion of the franchised courses, they progress to the UTech main campus to complete the upper years of their programmes.

The University has also established outreach centres in areas close to Kingston to enable part-time students to take UTech courses closer to their homes. These courses are taught by UTech instructors at facilities removed from the UTech campus, but students are considered full UTech students with access to all University campus facilities (such as the library and computer laboratories), which they can access on weekends or whenever they come to the main campus.

UTech has also developed articulation agreements with selected tertiary institutions to credit students emerging from identified programme years and courses with equivalencies that will give them advanced standing in UTech programmes. The articulated programmes' courses have been equated with UTech courses, which will therefore be eligible for accreditation by the University Council of Jamaica.²

These distance initiatives have really concentrated on affording Jamaicans access to UTech programmes and favoured a face-to-face approach away from the main campus. However, in keeping with its technological mandate, UTech has been eager to develop on-line courses in addition to more traditional face-to-face modes of course offering³.

In 1997 a Steering Committee for Open and Distance Learning (ODLSMC) chaired by the President was struck to explore the role and development of Open and Distance

² The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) is the accrediting body that grants programme accreditation to tertiary institutions in Jamaica. The UCJ is recognised internationally, and graduates of programmes it accredits are able to gain recognition of their degrees overseas.

³ More recently, UTech has conducted a few limited experiments in on-line delivery of selected courses in community colleges located at a considerable distance from UTech's main campus.

Learning modalities for the University with special emphasis on the opportunities offered by on-line modalities. The membership of this Steering Committee included several of the University's senior executives. The fact that the President chaired this committee underscored the importance placed on the development of on-line learning modalities for UTech. However, Steering Committees chaired by senior executives rarely carry out work at the implementation and technical levels, and this one was no exception despite the high-powered membership it boasted.

In 1998, when the University hired the Director for a new Office of Curriculum Development and Evaluation (OCDE), it noted her background in educational technology and interest in distance learning, and passed the chairmanship of the Steering Committee over to her. This appeared to be a natural and sensible assignment, since the development of curriculum for on-line courses was UTech's espoused strategic goal. With facilitation provided by the Director of the OCDE, the Steering Committee initiated a system of Faculty Coaches: a plan to identify, develop and train a group of interested academics in each Faculty who volunteered to undergo training as Faculty Coaches and establish a system whereby they would be able to lead the development of new on-line courseware for their peers after they had completed their training. The idea began enthusiastically: in Academic Year 1999-2000: workshops were scheduled on a monthly basis, following which participants were expected to carry out course development assignments for discussion and review at the following workshop. However, the participants' regular workload combined with the absence of any incentive (either in recognition or money) to assume additional work meant that the participants very quickly

lost interest in the training, and few tangible results (if any) emerged from the exercise. Perhaps the most positive result from these workshops was that one of the most enthusiastic and consistent workshop members left for PhD studies in Australia spurred on by her experiences in the training workshops.

Simultaneously, the University approached the European Union to request funds to provide staff upgrading that included (in the eventual proposal submitted) training at the Master's level in distance education, Master's degrees in other content areas undertaken by distance, and short-term certificate training in distance education. The intent of this massive training initiative was to create an understanding and working knowledge in a number of academic staff about how distance education works, how to develop distance courses and how it feels to take courses by distance⁴.

The ODLSMC also sponsored a decision-makers' workshop to advance the development of distance education and establish timelines and priorities for the growth of the initiative in early 1999. While the decision-makers worked enthusiastically on this plan and established reasonable operational timelines for the identified activities, the lack of a follow-up mechanism meant that there was slippage in the implementation of the plans and no means of encouraging Faculties to re-establish time frames for implementation of their plans. And their primary cry was that the support necessary for the implementation was missing⁵.

⁴ The European Union grant was approved in late 2001 and is currently in its initial implementation stages.

⁵ What was missing was a policy framework, a system for implementing those policies and the human and financial resources to develop courses on line. Technology systems alone were not sufficient to manage this ambitious plan.

In order to enable at least one part of the distance learning initiative, the installation of the technical infrastructure for on-line course delivery and multimedia courseware development was progressing on a parallel track to the development of human resources to lead the distance education/course development initiative. These technical improvements were carried out under the supervision of the Special Advisor to the President for Planning and Technology⁶. By early 1998 a campus-wide fibre optic network was installed and theoretically operational in most buildings on campus⁷, and by Academic Year 2001-02 most Faculties had operational computer labs for the use of the students and staff members. In addition, the School of Computing and Information Technology boasted two 50-station computer labs and the University Library, too, had a computer laboratory available for the use of any enrolled UTech students. A campus Intranet was available to students and staff, so that on-line course provision was at least technically possible on the campus.

Beginning as early as 1998, the University's Multimedia Centre collaborated with the Office of Curriculum Development and Evaluation in the training of the Faculty Coaches as well as the offering of sensitisation workshops for senior decision-makers in the University. As the Multimedia Centre came under the Office of Planning, Technology and Development, it conducted more workshops for staff and decision-makers in the use

⁶ In 2000 as part of the University's management restructuring, this position was upgraded to Senior Vice President for Planning, Technology and Development and an administrative support system including the University's Information Systems and the Multimedia Centre was included in the Office.

⁷ While the fibre optic cable was laid, the connectors, hubs and workstations for staff seemed harder to acquire. Thus, although the backbone for the network was in place, actual connectivity in many Schools and labs lagged behind.

of multimedia tools (although not directly in course development or institutional technologies).

A significant boost to UTech's distance learning ambitions occurred in 2000, when the University entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to pilot a Special Diploma in Technical and Vocational Teaching in up to six countries in the English-speaking Caribbean region, agreeing to offer it to practising TVE teachers in service by distance using the COL Core Curriculum and learning materials. This project has encouraged UTech to pay more attention to distance education and given it a giant "leg up" on distance offerings. While the courses are primarily supported by print-based self-instructional materials managed by local tutors available to the participating students in scheduled face-to-face sessions in each participating country, the tutors use "low tech" communications media (telephone and e-mail) to stay in touch with assigned UTech advisors for the various modules.⁸

In September 2000 UTech seconded a member of the teaching staff in the School of Technical and Vocational Education as Coordinator of Open and Distance Learning to draft the University's policies to govern distance learning and to train interested staff in the skills needed to translate existing face-to-face courses into on-line courses. During her secondment, she worked on developing the policies necessary to underpin the growth and development of distance education at UTech. She, too, mounted a workshop for decision makers from all relevant University units to identify areas in which policies

⁸ A separate parallel session on the COL/UTech Special Diploma in TVE Teaching will examine this pilot programme in more detail. Please see the programme schedule for time and place of that session.

were required and to propose the relevant policies for the University⁹. However, despite the best of intentions, no formal policies were approved by the University to guide the development of distance offerings.

In Academic Year 2001-02 and continuing this current year, the University has developed and offered its first on-line course for credit¹⁰. Developed by a lecturer in the Caribbean School of Architecture (CSA) who returned home to the Netherlands after his contract with the University ended, this course in Architectural History was piloted with the CSA Masters students in the second semester of Academic Year 2001-02 and supported with face –to-face lectures offered by a resident tutor at UTech. The first year’s offering was problematic: both the students and the tutor¹¹ felt there was too little local content, the scheduled on-line discussions were too unreliable, and the course was too print-oriented – in other words, they felt there was little or no value added by accessing the course on-line. This year, however, the course has been completely revamped in response to the criticisms received, and students are happier with the on-line component.

⁹ At the end of her secondment, this lecturer went on study leave to complete her doctorate. She has 18 months in which to complete her studies before she is required to return to UTech.

¹⁰ Certain modules of the course were offered on line, not the entire course.

¹¹ The tutor has a doctorate in the area and has been teaching the course face-to-face.

3.0 Designing the plans: the advent of focus and direction – a Director of

Continuing Education and Distance Learning

In February 2002, UTech hired a Director of Continuing Education and Distance Learning (CEDL)¹² to spearhead the development and evolution of distance modalities and continuing education offerings at the University. The Director has been tasked with developing an appropriate structure, policies, and procedures for the development and implementation of the University's continuing education and distance learning operation. As has previously been noted, there have been several planning exercises and preliminary policy development efforts undertaken in the University, but these proceeded sporadically because of a number of organisational and resource constraints, not the least of which was the lack of a central coordinated focus for the efforts. Accordingly, the first major task for the new Director has been to compile, organise and categorise the previous efforts, and draw together the separate threads of development and initiatives that have occurred previously. This effort has included a review of all previous work done to date by the various units within the University, review of relevant committee and project minutes and documentation, and his engaging in lengthy discussions with appropriate stakeholders throughout the University. This effort will, in all likelihood, be a continuing task for some additional period of time.

¹² The University has agreed that Open Learning is a philosophical stance that should apply to all courses and programmes, whether offered by distance or face-to-face. Therefore the responsibility for managing Open Learning has been made a university-wide responsibility, not just the job of the Director of Continuing Education and Distance Learning. Hence the change in job title.

Having reviewed the composition of the Academic Policy Committee's Sub-Committee for Open and Distance Learning¹³, as an initial activity the new Director proposed its restructuring into a technical committee comprised of Faculty representatives with an expressed interest in and commitment to distance education. Also invited to participate in the restructured Sub-Committee are members of all relevant administrative and academic support units throughout the University, so that the Sub-Committee will not only represent all units necessary for progress in the development of a dual mode University, but also will have connections with every facet of the administrative system needed to implement distance education initiatives in the University. The significance of this restructuring is that the Sub-Committee will now have implementers who work with courses and programmes readily available to review proposed distance education initiatives and recommend realistic strategies for their completion.

Finally, as part of the restructuring process, the Director drafted new Terms of Reference¹⁴ expanding the role and scope of the Sub-Committee beyond the mere provision of policy advice to include action on distance education initiatives, thus making the Sub-Committee members more directly involved in the development of distance education at the University. This Sub Committee will now be able to propose active plans for developing courseware and projects in distance learning.

At the same time as the CEDL Sub-Committee was restructured, the Director of CEDL was added to the membership of important University-wide and Academic Affairs

¹³ This Sub-Committee was the successor to the ODLSMC in the restructuring of University Committees in 2000.

¹⁴ These new Terms of Reference were approved by the Academic Board in April, 2002.

Committees. His participation in these University Committees will allow CEDL to become an integral part of the university governance and committee structure. These memberships have numerous additional benefits: they are a clear indication of support from senior administration for the development of Distance modalities in the University; they will provide access to information and planning efforts from all parts of the University, and they provide numerous channels for input from and dialogue with other critical University sectors needed to integrate distance initiatives into the University's operations.

The first major initiative, which was critically important to the focused development of CEDL in the University, involved the development of a Strategic Plan for CEDL as part of the overall University strategic planning process. During the early months of 2002, the University embarked upon a major review of its *Strategic Plan 2000-04* and moved toward the development of a new *Strategic Plan 2003-2007* to guide the University. This process included a complete review of the previous strategic plan, a compilation of accomplishments achieved, modifications to that *Strategic Plan* based upon progress made and changes in circumstances, and the development of new goals, preferred options, and strategic objectives for University. As part of this process, a revised Academic Development Plan has been developed and the sections on continuing education and distance learning have been significantly modified. This revised Academic Development Plan then has been the basis for an initial one year Activity Plan for CEDL in which specific goals and objectives, activities, responsibilities, timelines, and costs are detailed.

4.0 Building the structure: future initiatives to develop a dual mode institution

Several major areas of objectives have been laid out for CEDL as part of its first year's Activity Plan. These include:

- The development of a complete inventory of all current CEDL programmes currently operating within the University
- Development of CEDL organisational structure, policies, and procedures for programme development and implementation.
- Incorporation of faculty training systems for the development of distributed education, on-line course development and multimedia systems along with the necessary resources and support needed to develop and deliver courses and programmes
- Recruitment and selection of eight current faculty for additional graduate degree work through face-to-face and distance education programmes in their areas of specialisation¹⁵
- Recruitment and selection of 28 current faculty to undertake a graduate programme in Open and Distance Learning through either a face-to face or distance modalities¹⁶.
- Recruitment and selection of other current faculty for short course and certificate programmes in open and distance learning, delivered through distance education whenever possible¹⁷.

¹⁵ This activity relates to the support available under the EU grant.

¹⁶ Also part of the EU grant.

¹⁷ The final training component in the EU grant to advance distance education in the University.

- Exploration of collaborative agreements within the University to develop alternative and innovative courses and programmes which can be offered by distance modalities.
- Exploration of collaborative agreements with external agencies and institutions for the development and delivery of programmes and coursework. by distance¹⁸
- Development and delivery of at least one new non-credit professional technical training programme in each of the five Faculties within the University
- Incorporation of multimedia and distributed education components in at least two courses in each of the five Faculties within the University.

To support and enhance these specific activities set down in the CEDL Activity Plan for 2002-03, other planning and development efforts the CEDL Director will collaborate with other major units within the University to ensure the provision of the required infrastructure and resources base necessary for successful implementation of distance and open learning. These activities relate to the available systems and their capacity¹⁹, concentrating on the need for upgraded and expanded information technology capability in order to be able to deliver programmes and courses effectively. These issues include:

- The acquisition of additional hardware and software needed to develop and deliver technologically based programmes and courses effectively. Very important to any on-line initiative will be the availability of sufficient bandwidth capacity, dedicated servers, and appropriate web course development software.

¹⁸ In particular, the University is seeking to develop professional upgrading and refresher courses for practising professionals.

¹⁹ Both hardware and software systems and resources

- The acquisition and implementation of the necessary hardware and software to provide effective computer-based student services. This initiative is being undertaken in collaboration with the Office of Planning, Technology and Development, the Information Systems Department, and the Office of the Vice President Administration and Registrar, who have recently inaugurated a large project to acquire and implement a completely computerised data based student administrative system. It is envisioned that this system, when fully implemented, will provide an integrated platform for the development and delivery of web based programs and courses, and the provision of student services for all distance education students.
- The acquisition and implementation of a computerised database for all library materials, and the establishment of online linkages for access to library materials and other information resources, a project that is underway in the University Library, and is projected to be operational in the near future²⁰.

5.0 A note of caution: delays in construction and holes in the roof

As one would expect, the establishment of a fully operational continuing education and distance learning unit within the University will not happen overnight, and there are numerous challenges that will have to be overcome for such an ambitious endeavour to be successful. Many of these obstacles have been noted in the recent virtual conference entitled “The role of distance education in small and island states in the Commonwealth” which was held as a part of the pre-conference activities for the second Pan-Commonwealth Forum in Durban. These include lack of resources

²⁰ Complementary funding for this initiative is also provided under the EU grant.

(both capital and human resources within the nation), lack of technological infrastructure conducive to distance education, geographical and cultural barriers and resistance to change within the institution. While some of these are susceptible to change, others are less so, and these factors will make the process problematic in some instances. Further, while it may be possible to develop a distance education programme within institutions, these programmes are often quite expensive, and many institutions will lack the necessary resources to “go it alone.” This suggests that collaborative efforts and partnerships may be the most fortuitous approach for institutions in smaller, less developed countries. We hope to expand such partnerships through our own institution.

6.0 Retrospective

What we have provided is a brief history of distance education efforts at UTech, a short description of our accomplishments to date, an overview of our present planning efforts and our activity plans for the future. The usefulness of this brief history and glimpse of the future is to assist other similarly-situated universities consider all of the infrastructure and resources necessary for a successful leap into dual mode offerings in their own institutions.

We here at UTech fully realise that the challenges confronting us are more easily identified than overcome: the effort will take both time and dedication, and require the input, support, and effort of the entire University community. We are hopeful for success.