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Myths and Realities of Distance Education

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It seemed that the debate whether distance education is better or worse than traditional campus learning was over long back. Enlightened academia had agreed that both the systems had evolved for different reasons and could be good or bad depending on the efforts that went into those systems. That is why when the UGC, without any evidence or study, decided that degrees obtained through study in the distance education mode should be treated on par with traditional campus learning degrees, there was not much hue and cry. But today when some of the academia and educational administrators who can shape public opinion as well as policies of the government make statements that defy the basic understanding about distance and open learning, it signals that the situation is becoming alarming and calls for a revisiting of some of the aspects of distance and open learning.

Why are such statements being made? Probably, the increasing enrollment in distance education during the past couple of decades, both in India and elsewhere in the world, have led them to think that on-campus formal education can be progressively replaced by distance education. The supporters of this view assume that the distance mode of educational delivery would substantially reduce the public expenditure on higher education as it has the potential for much larger reach than face-to-face (F2F) classroom interactions. They also argue that with the adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), multimedia based interactive teaching can virtually replace F2F teaching. Distance education is even projected as the best option to expand the higher education system for the third world where one out of 1000 have access to higher education as compared to one out of 50 of the developed countries. An attempt is made in this article to look at these claims rather closely and see how much of them are real possibilities and how much are myths built on the fashionable and popular views fuelled by overenthusiastic academics and ICT companies interested in the education sector.

The Evolution and Objectives of Formal Education

For the progress of humankind the essentiality of enriching individuals with literacy and education has been well recognized for the past 5-600 years. Communities around the world have been convinced that literacy and education are powerful and valuable enough to be spared considerable effort and resources to promote them systematically among the younger generation. The result is the massive formal educational system in place everywhere and youngsters who are committed to spend almost one-fourth of their lifetime on a full-time basis in the formal system to gain the knowledge and experience

of humankind accrued over millennia. Thus, the traditional clientele for higher education are those who have successfully completed the formal primary and secondary 12 years of schooling and are ready to move on seamlessly to the tertiary level of professional and general higher education. That means the entrants are 17+ years of age and they can complete the first degree at the age of 20+, 21+, 22+ or 23+ depending on their choice of study and also based on the qualifications framework of the nation of study.

It is the general perception that such concerted education as done in the present on-campus formal education would give a head-start for the younger generation to carry forward their contribution to societal development. Formal education in this context is not confined to the transfer of knowledge alone. It includes endowing the youngsters with a host of skills, competencies, capabilities and values coming from the experiences of the past. Nations around the world strongly believe that providing on-campus formal education is a national investment and therefore spend almost one-fourth of their revenue for educating the relevant age group. Such spending is justified by the high correlation seen between national productivity and the access to post-secondary formal education of the relevant age group.

One of the expected outcomes of such on-campus formal education is to enable students to pursue self-learning throughout their life. In fact, distance education is expected to play a supportive role to formal education in two ways - to support the continuous or lifelong learning needs of successful candidates of the formal system and to provide access to those who were left out of the formal system for various reasons.

Distance Education - its Advent and Growth

The emergence of distance education as a part of traditional formal education is largely a post-World War II event in contrast to formal education that dates from 10th century AD. It began as a 'second chance' for those who were left out or for the dropouts of formal education during -World War II and thereafter. During the first half of the last century, many of the college-going age groups missed their opportunity to enter higher education due to the two protracted world wars and the associated economic depression. Many youngsters had either to join the army or work for the war efforts. In addition, access to higher education itself was limited then, due to the diversion of resources to the waging of the wars. The political reshaping of

the post-cold war world order substantially changed all these constraints. War veterans and other adults looked forward to continuing their education though they were well past the relevant age limits.

There was another development that warranted the growth of distance education. By 1960, the great expansion in knowledge had set in. A tremendous number of books, journals, articles and so forth were published based on research and inquiry leading to many discoveries and inventions. In fact the first sign of doubling of knowledge in all areas in about ten years became evident in the mid-1960s; the doubling time now is a mere 3-4 years. The increase in the quantum of knowledge placed enormous pressure on the curriculum. Subject areas became more specialized and the curricula more standardized to ensure that the 'essentials' would be taught. There was much more to master outside the standardized essentials. The system of higher education had to expand and diversify to meet these challenges.

Parallel to these developments, the nature of work in the job market underwent transformations. More skilled and educated work forces were needed. The factory/agriculture-based demand for unskilled or semi-skilled work force reduced considerably and was replaced by a demand for people who can work in knowledge-based industries, for instance, in high tech sectors such as computing, telecommunications and biotechnology and service industries such as financial services, health, entertainment, hospitality and tourism. The knowledge-based industries needed an educated work force with an up-to-date knowledge base. Also, the faster obsolescence of current knowledge puts a premium on the 'learning' work force. Many new industries furthermore required a highly flexible and adaptable work force that could continuously change as the world changed around them. The situation changed so dramatically that only those with higher education and an up-to-date knowledge base could possibly gain upward mobility in the social hierarchy. The working groups that wanted to update their knowledge and skills needed flexible learning options. Lifelong flexible learning thus became essential.

The combined effect of these factors - the demand for access to higher education from a different age group, the knowledge explosion and the need for lifelong flexible learning - had built pressure on the higher education system to expand as well as to diversify. To cater to the newly emerging clientele from a vastly different age group, distance education was

evolved as a parallel stream by leading universities the world over. Stand-alone distance education institutions came up relatively later as a natural extension. Open learning under the distance education category is a variation in the extent of its flexibility. It is distinguished from other forms of distance education in its accommodation to provide an open access to anyone without any age limit or any qualifying pre-requisites.

Many countries of the world have now established distance learning provisions in one form or other. Most of the traditional universities in these countries have their own distance education centers and also offer online courses. The statistics on distance education compiled by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in 2000 (www.chea.org) and the data provided in a World Bank publication series reflect the exciting developments that are taking place in distance education. Some of the numbers may have even doubled now. According to those sources, nearly 14% of university students in Australia study at a distance. In the UK, Open University degrees are recognized as representing a rigorous, thorough British education. 57% of Canadian universities offer as many as 3000 online courses in all. In the USA, it was reported that the distance education enrollment figure which stood at 1.6 millions in 1997-98 would reach 2.2 millions in 2002. The proportion of US universities with distance education courses grew from 34% in 1997-98 to about 50% in 1999-2000. Thirty-three of the fifty-two states in the USA have a statewide virtual university and 85% of the community colleges that cater to a large number of adult learners were expected to offer online courses by 2002. Likewise, many of the Asian and African, South American countries have also established their distance education units and open universities mostly modeled either after US distance education institutes or the UK Open University. Many of the east European and sub-Saharan African countries are yet to have their own distance education centers though they use transnational distance education programs to some extent. A more recent development in the field of education is the convergence of traditional and distance education since the advent and use of ICT in education.

Distributed Learning vs. Distance Learning

Technology has been integrated into almost all forms of education making the distinctions between various forms of education less clear. With online delivery systems and approaches being employed for both distant and on-campus students, distance education and on-campus instruction are converging. Today, on-campus students can take a part of the program or courses through "online" or "e-learning" routes in the campus or away from the campus. This combination has narrowed down the gap between the on- and off-campus students and has resulted in the use of the more broad-based term "distributed learning" adopted from the usage of the term 'distributed' to denote the networked nodal servers with the main one in the IT sector.

Very soon the term "distributed learning" may replace "distance education" because distance is too restrictive a concept. Distributed learning can occur either on- or off-campus, providing students with greater flexibility and eliminating time as a barrier to learning. Regardless of whether students are on- or off-campus, by integration of technology into education, learning becomes distributed. In fact, the "anytime, anyplace" nature of distributed learning has its greatest impact on campus instruction in countries where online courses are in vogue. Some universities advertise that their online courses cost less and encourage the campus students to earn part of their credits through online courses. Consequently, distance learning needs to be redefined. It may be seen as a subset of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in time and space from their peers and the instructor. It is a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources. It takes a wide variety of forms and use of electronic media is not necessarily required.

Most of the traditional universities in the affluent and Anglophonic countries like the USA use online 'courses' (not the whole program leading to a qualification) for on-campus students as a supplement to the formal teaching in the classrooms. The traditional universities in these countries are well equipped for the purpose. In an English-speaking country, the basic textual literacy of the average collegiate students is relatively high to cope with the self-learning from the online sources. Since they are online, the courses are also made available to off-campus students to earn credits towards the awards. A few of the well-known universities like Harvard, MIT, Cornell, Columbia and Stanford have made their course materials available online to anyone in the world free for their use. It is something like our universities that run correspondence education make their distance educational course materials available to on-campus students. This convergence of on-campus and off-campus learning

facilitated by the ICT would reduce the pressure on some of the stand-alone open universities and colleges in the future. In fact, UK Open University had to close down its off-shore center in USA for want of takers· since the advent of distributed learning in the universities.

Developments in Indian Higher Education

The developments in the formal system of higher education in the country are quiet impressive; from only 21 universities and 500 colleges in 1947, the system has grown to a network of more than 16000 institutions with 8 million students and 500,000 teachers. The formal system run by the universities has been the promoter of distance education in the country to a large extent. Out of the 120-odd traditional general education universities that are more than ten years old, 108 of them run distance education units concurrently. In other words, nearly 80% of the general education universities offer distance education, largely using the correspondence or postal mode of supply of learning materials. There are 11 stand-alone Open Universities as of now of which many are yet to take off. All the Open Universities are run as state institutions mostly on their own revenues with the lone exception of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) that is run by the central government directly with substantial annual and development grants. It is estimated that about 20% of the nearly eight millions enrolled in post-secondary education are in distance and open education units. All distance education degrees are officially recognized at par with those of formal education.

Very recently, a number of traditional universities/ deemed-to-be universities have commenced virtual learning provisions on their websites and they are yet to attract any significant number of takers. By and large, the programs of studies offered in the distance learning institutions are on the patterns of traditional qualifications like UG, PG, certificate and diploma and depend heavily on using text-based lessons distributed through the postal system. Some experiments on e-learning, exploring its potential, are under way in both formal and non-formal learning units. As most of the Indian institutions of higher learning do not use the credit system, 'course' based online distributed learning provisions are limited. However, there have been successful attempts to have online courses for on-campus students at least in some of the institutions like BITS, Pilani, and a number of Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) that follow credit-based semester education. Such options are used well by on-campus students at Pilani to get an additional (double) degree. In universities like Pondicherry University, regular students register for any of the short-term courses offered by its distance education center that are text-based as in correspondence education.

Need for a Holistic perspective about Distance Education

Many of the myths about distance education have their roots in the lack of understanding of the basic tenets of the two modes of education - campus learning and distance learning. The two modes have evolved to serve different purposes that might be complementary in nature. The major differences lie in the profile of the clientele of the two modes and the predominant mode of delivery.

Difference in the Profiles of the Learners

The profile of the majority of the learners in both the systems makes all the difference. The profile of the distance education learners is a combination of several features: adult, employed, in-charge of families, home-bound, travel-prone, variously prepared or unprepared for advanced study with some substantial prior formal learning, motivated, self-disciplined, clear about future directions, ready to take responsibility for outcomes. Understandably, the needs of these adult learners are significantly different from those of traditional teenage students. Most of the adult learners would have had prior learning through the formal system and require flexibility in continuing education as most of them would have settled in their lives. They essentially seek education for professional advancement and it may include another degree or certificate in an entirely different discipline. Getting a short training may be essential even to continue in their current job. Some of them may need non-credit certification and re-certification to validate their experience and training. Above all, they need a device for measuring their learning outcomes and part-time learning provisions. Many simply cannot be on campus or study full time. For some, a typical classroom feels inappropriate, with its students inexperienced in life, its teacher authoritative and sometimes equally inexperienced. In contrast to the average age of 17+ of students who enter the on-campus post-secondary education, the average age of students enrolled in distance education is between 30 to 35 years all over the world. It is so in South American countries like Argentina, the UK, all the Indian distance education variants including IGNOU,

open learning institutes in Vietnam and Myanmar, African countries including South Africa, in all the North American countries including the USA. The distance education system was basically evolved to suit these adult learners well. It won't suit the sort of late adolescents who go to college to learn life skills. It will suit them 10 years later, when they become adults and when life has taught them to know what they want and how to work to get it.

The profile of a distance education learner indicates the need for high flexibility in terms of learning anytime and anywhere; that may not be feasible in the traditional formal education as students in the formal sector cannot take too long to complete their studies. Especially when the formal system of higher education is subsidized with public money, flexibility has to be exercised with caution. Often times, distance education learners take as much as five to six years to complete a three-year undergraduate program. In fact, the enrollment figures projected for distance education has to be taken with caution since, once a student registers, he or she might continue their registration for several years or until they complete their studies. The profile also indicates that learners in distance education being adults and part-timers already settled in life, they can pay for their education unlike in the traditional formal stream where the education of young students has to be subsidized by government and supported by parents.

The fact that most of the distance education units in the country follow the calendar year for their operation instead of the academic year is another indication that the two systems are catering to two different clienteles.

Mode of Delivery and Other Differences

The next major difference between campus learning and distance education lies in the mode of delivery. The formal and rigorous education designed to educate the younger generation on a full-time basis uses F2F teaching for most of the curricular transactions with about 10% of the time for the use of other forms. Distance education, generally meant for adults, however, devotes only a few hours of contact classes (F2F teaching) in study centers while the predominant mode of educational delivery is through self-learning. Even in distance education, the importance of F2F interaction is well recognized and hence most of the programs compulsorily use contact and interactive sessions through study centers. The other major difference is the exclusive thrust on the knowledge component of education in distance learning as against the comprehensive education in on-campus education in which 'knowledge' is only one of many elements such as a whole range of academic and social skills, competencies and values. By and large distance education is learner-centered while it cannot completely be so in campus education except perhaps in areas like activity-oriented teaching plans.

The use of ICT in addition to the use of postal services for delivery of the distance education program is a natural consequence of technological developments in the telecommunication and computer sectors. It is the latest variant that has the potential not only for the speedy delivery of educational materials but also for interactive learning. Though the use of multimedia is promising, much depends on the national infrastructure for ICT and the availability of such facilities at the learner's end. The use of ICT for reaching on-campus students who have access to such facilities is not entirely uncommon even in India. BITS, Pilani, a few of the IITs, and a few of the traditional universities are the few notable examples in this regard.

After all, on-campus education also grew with technology. The use of papyrus and later paper for writing and the use of printing technology are some of the early examples that had greatly facilitated the educational processes and reach of campus learning. Likewise the discovery and inventions of electricity, radio, television, telephones of the 20th Century and their use in education are too well known. In fact educational radio came in 1920, educational TV in the 1950s, 16 mm films and video technology between 1930-80, audio conferencing in the 1970s, computer education in the mid-1980s and internet use from 1995. However all these media are in use as teaching aids and are used occasionally because of several factors including their sophistication, cost and the ease with which they are readily usable. The use of ICT for on-campus students in a way will fall under this category.

With appropriate infrastructure, it is possible in India, for any teacher who teaches a course in a college to put his/her lessons on the Internet and use it as a supplement. A few students, particularly the advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students and research scholars, may be able to use such online courses provided they are facilitated. It is possible in the North American continent to offer online courses to senior undergraduate and graduate students who know

English language well and in their access to one or the other forms of ICT. It may take a while for third world countries where language and resources are constraints.

With this background, let us examine the myths and realities of distance education.

Myth 1. Distance and Open learning should be subsidized like traditional formal learning

The profile of the two systems clearly indicate that the open and distance learning predominantly serves the adult, mostly employed and well settled learners who want to update their skills and qualifications. That is how the distance education itself evolved. The clientele of this mode can certainly pay for its educational cost.

The data from the different countries indicate that the adult learners in many countries outnumber the relevant age group learners. Subsidising the adult learners would imply a major shift in the funding priorities of the government. In a country like India with shrinking resources for higher education, that manages to provide access to higher education only to around six per cent of the relevant age group, the government subsidy should be guided by well informed study about the benefits of public spending. One is not sure whether such authentic costing has been done. Supporting distance education cannot be done at the expense of educating the relevant age group.

Myth 2. On-campus formal education will be replaced by distance education

It can never happen. On-campus traditional formal education, as outlined earlier, has a well-defined objective of transferring general knowledge, academic skills, competencies and values in a concerted and rigorous way through a well-structured education system designed for 12 years of schooling and 3-4 years of tertiary education. It is meant for full-time students who spend in all about a quarter of their life for the purpose; it builds literacy first - literacy of different levels - that forms the foundation for any further effective learning of selected knowledge and experiences. Distance education that requires some levels of prior learning cannot possibly extend such concerted training. The data on the age profile of the clientele of the two systems indicate that distance education serves the adult learners while traditional formal education serves the relevant age group; one cannot replace the other. There is no evidence of many fresh school graduates between 17 and 18 years of age seeking admission into distance education units anywhere in the world. The necessity to open 'evening colleges' where the enrollment outnumber the 'regular' sessions and to promote self financing colleges that outnumber public and public funded institutions are the real index of the choice of the traditional-age students to F2F education.

Myth 3. Open learning is ICT intensive and distance education by traditional universities is text based

Many, particularly those who are associated with open learning units, believe that Open Universities are characterized by the extensive use of technology while traditional distance education is largely dependent on the postal system for delivery and mostly on self-learning. The fact is that all of the eleven Open Universities of the country depend on the correspondence mode of transfer of textual lessons and other reading materials and on self-learning by and large. Although the well-endowed national open university of the country has made enormous investments from the public money in its ICT based experiments, how much of it actually percolated to the educational experience of a typical open learning student is a big question. On the other hand, many of the correspondence education units have been using radio and other electronic media for a number of decades to supplement their interactive teaching. The correspondence education unit of Madurai Kamaraj University has been using radio lessons for over thirty years now.

Myth 4. ICT-enabled education will make distance education programmes less expensive

There are arguments that instructions mediated by telecommunications will bring new gains in productivity and that somehow will hike access and quality while reducing the cost, a claim for which there is yet precious little evidence. No authentic costing has been done so far for ICT-based distance education and how much of it will be passed on to students and how much will be subsidized are not known. Most of the 108 correspondence education units have no source of subsidy and have to depend on their own revenues. Any well-designed ICT-based education will cost much more than that of the regular classroom education. In the final analysis, it may require students to have their own computers and common powerful servers with back-ups. Additional requirements will

include intranet connectivity, access to broadband Internet facility - factors which depend on the nature of the national infrastructure for communication. To manage the high-tech processes, the support system should also be strong enough with technical personnel as well as specially trained academics.

Therefore it is fallacious to assume that the distance mode of education would substantially reduce public expenditure on higher education as it has the potential for much larger reach than face-to-face (F2F) classroom interactions. As indicated earlier no costing so far has been done about ICT-intensive distance education for a whole program leading to an award. Even correspondence education with minimal contact classes is not substantially economical for the students. ICT-based distance education definitely will be highly expensive - even more than the F2F mode as all the facilities are cost intensive, both for establishment and maintenance. One is not sure whether governments will be ready to subsidize the cost of education of adult learners to the same extent that they are statutorily expected to support formal education for relevant age groups with all their financial constraints. Even the state open universities get only minimum support from their state governments and run on the student fee. The central government support to IGNOU may be an exception.

5. The adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can virtually replace F2F formal teaching

The educational benefits of human intellectual interaction are undoubted. Nothing can be more effective than F2F formal education for fresh high school graduates. Good teaching is aural, visual, animated and interactive and therefore in a way a multi-sensory experience that can further be supplemented with appropriate teaching aids. Suggestions about the possible replacement of faculty by machines in ICT-enabled distance education may not be practical as all the available evidence indicates otherwise. In a country like India, the ICT intensive distance education would require adequate ICT support facilities at the study centers since not all distance learners can afford to have such ICT enriched environments. In addition to the cost involved in building the ICT facilities, to maintain an interactive ICT-enabled classroom for 40 students either in the campus or in distributed study centers, it is estimated that at least five academic and technical staff are needed in each site. Again in the

Indian context, this would imply additional restrictions on access, timing etc that would be contrary to the claims of anywhere, anytime flexibility of distance education. This is not a far-fetched imagination since the existing practices of access to counselors, advisers and contact classes in the open and distance education modes already have these restrictions.

Online schooling or online higher education is by and large textual no matter how much ICT is integrated into it. Sound literacy and the related cognitive skills are essential for learning through online lessons. The profile of the normal age groups that go for school and undergraduate education does not indicate any such potential for independent online learning.

Myth 6. Distance education is highly flexible in contrast to traditional formal education that is rigid

Flexibility has many dimensions; flexibility of a high order in the time, place and duration of learning is needed only for adult learners and not so much for full-time students of the traditional relevant age group. In fact, on-campus formal education has necessarily to be well structured, selective about what is to be taught and suitably condensed to maximize full-time learning within a predetermined period of time. Public spending on education of the relevant age group cannot possibly be for leisurely (flexible) learning and no government can possibly support such a system for an indeterminate period of time. Flexibility in the choice of courses is essential and the choice-based credit system that provides a reasonable flexibility is gaining ground in the formal system. Therefore, flexibility, in whatever aspects necessary, is there in the campus based formal education and it is up to the institutions and learners to exercise it appropriately.

Realities: Upholding the Relevance of Distance Education

From what has been discussed so far, it is evident that formal campus education meant for the younger age group can never be substituted by distance education. At the same time, there is a real demand for distance education from the adult learners due to the need for updating their knowledge and skills in the changed context. The process of expansion of distance educational provisions that commenced since the end of World War II is a continuing process. As long as the well educated fraction of the population increases through the expansion of the formal campus

education, the education market of adult learners will also continue to expand. The impact of technology adds exciting dimensions to all forms of education and distance education or distributed education for a learning society in one form or other has therefore come to stay.

Another reality is that there are many unanswered questions that pose real challenges to judge the effectiveness of distance learning. If one losses sight of the distinctive characteristics of distance education, wrong assumptions and faulty priorities may result in distance education losing its relevance and suffering from problems related to inferior quality. The existing form of open distance education that was relevant in the 20th century when it all started to cater to the left outs and drop outs of the mainstream will need radical change for remaining relevant in the 21st century. Now it is an adult and continuing education for life long learners who already have substantial formal campus education. Is there a sound research base to base the radical changes on?

The reality is that there are many inconclusive and not so clear aspects in distance education that need to be sorted out. It looks as though the changes introduced in distance and open learning hinges on novelty rather than the rationale. The World Bank publication entitled "Tertiary Education in the Twenty First Century: Challenges and Opportunities" (Salmi J, 2000) and the review done in 1999 by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) in USA on "what the research in distance education tells us and does not tell us" highlight many of those critical aspects that need rather urgent attention.

One should quickly find the answers to some of the following questions through research or pilot studies, not depending only on the wisdom of the elder academics to uphold the relevance of distance education:

- How to promote sufficient interaction in distance education courses, in order to build up critical thinking and social learning? What is an appropriate mix of face-to-face and distance teaching?

- How can students acquire the values needed to live as responsible citizens through open and distance learning?

- Which is a better way to organize programs and courses for a learning society of all age groups - separate strategies or in an integrated way?

- How to choose technologies suitable to the affordability of the "learning society" without compromising on the curricular and pedagogical objectives?

- How to avoid over-reliance on technological gimmicks and loss of hands-on training opportunities?

- How to preserve linguistic and cultural identity as communication in a major world language becomes more and more imperative?

- How to finance the new educational technologies and related infrastructures in a sustainable way?

- How to reconcile to growing digital divide among the haves and have-nots?

- What should be the policy of the national governments to subsidize the adult learners who can afford to meet their further educational needs? And how long?

- What does research say about the different learning styles of students and how they relate to the use of particular technologies?

- How effective are the digital libraries for the distance education learners?

- Does research explain why the drop out rate is high among distance learners?

Finding an answer to these questions that have been conveniently neglected so far is not an easy task. One is not sure how far the fund starved distance education units of the traditional universities will be able to take up these issues as they get into the distributed education mode to serve concurrently both teen-age and adult learners.

It looks as though now the distinction between distance education and campus education itself is a myth, if one considers the convergence between the two already happening in the major universities. When technology is integrated into formal educational processes and used for the 'distributed education' for both on- and off-campus students, the distinction between them gets blurred. This appears to be the general intention of the Indian UGC in diverting enormous funds for ICT ultimately to promote the distributed education in the traditional dual mode universities. That makes one wonder how the stand-alone distance education centers like the national and state Open Universities are going to uphold their relevance and distinct purposes they wish to pursue and how the Distance Education Council is going to steer them. ❑