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EDITORIAL

In this issue of DEOSNEWS we present a discussion paper based on deliberations at the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in March, 1995. International representatives of distance education providers, in discussing the consequences of using electronic delivery methods, concentrated on three areas: a guide for students taking distance courses, a guide to institutional responsibilities, and guidelines for interinstitutional collaboration. Ian Mugridge, who submitted this paper, welcomes responses and comments from interested readers. Please respond to him directly at the e-mail address below.

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REMOTE DELIVERY OF PROGRAMMES

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INTRODUCTION

The initial discussions, leading to the development of the attached documents, occurred at The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in Vancouver, British Columbia, on 27th and 28th March, 1995. It was based on the document that accompanies this paper and on the assumption that what the participants, representatives of provider institutions in different parts of the world, had gathered to discuss was the consequences, both for institutions and students, of the growing use of electronic means to deliver single courses or programmes or both. It became clear during the discussions, however, that the group was not simply talking about electronic delivery of courses and programmes but, more broadly, about the delivery of courses and programmes by distance teaching institutions to students who are geographically remote from the region that such institutions were established to serve.

The general title of this paper has thus been chosen to indicate this strongly held view of the participants in the Vancouver meeting. It was this view too, that led the group to the conclusion that the documents they produced must concentrate on three major areas of interest. The first and second of these are, of course, the two major participants in the remote offering of courses (indeed, in any kind of course offerings), students and institutions. The third area is inter-institutional collaboration which seemed to present one of the primary means of solving many of the problems resulting from the

increase in remote delivery of courses and programmes.

The group thus developed three documents reflecting these emphases. The first, a Guide for Students, was designed for distribution to students enrolling in remotely offered courses and to enable them to ask basic questions about the courses in which they propose to enrol, questions that will, in turn, produce answers that will provide students with a clear basis for their enrolment decisions. The second, a Guide to Institutional Responsibilities, was designed to assist institutions to establish and maintain acceptable standards in their remote course offerings. The third discusses the question of developing interinstitutional partnerships and makes some suggestions about furthering this activity to strengthen the remote offering of courses and programmes.

In the fall of 1995, these documents were distributed to the institutional members of the International Council for Distance Education with a request for their reactions. The response from those institutions which replied was universally supportive of the initiative itself; and several institutions also made detailed suggestions for revision of the documents themselves. Many of these have been incorporated into a second draft that was circulated to the members of the original consulting group. The attached documents incorporate their subsequent comments as well.

The third document which relates to developing inter-institutional partnerships has been retained in its original form. COL is currently pursuing the suggestion made by the original consulting group that it should bring together individuals and institutions to develop a series of proposals. It is hoped that the results of these discussions will be available quite soon.

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ELECTRONIC DELIVERY OF COURSES

A Discussion Paper

1. Introduction

Distance teaching institutions have been aware for many years of both the advantages and the pitfalls of inter-institutional collaboration. In the last ten years or so, the idea of such collaboration has passed from one that was widely regarded as estimable but impractical to one that has been frequently implemented with considerable success. The literature that has resulted from both successful and unsuccessful attempts at collaboration emphasises one cardinal principle in developing successful partnerships - that is, the paramount need for the parties to any collaboration to be very clear from the outset about the terms of the agreement and the responsibilities of all participants.

Much collaboration to this point has been developed in response to the growing realisation among institutions in all parts of the world that their own resources, always limited and often severely strained, are increasingly inadequate to meet the demands made of them. More recently, however, inter-institutional collaboration has developed in

response to the widespread availability of technological aids to development and delivery of materials that have made such collaboration both more possible and simpler. The proliferation of electronic methods of delivery have at least the potential to move this process further forward and to allow distance teaching institutions to better serve their own students and those of others; and with a far greater variety of offerings. This situation also has an equal potential for confusion, disorder and even abuse which will bring discredit to responsible institutions and confusion and frustration for students.

It is primarily to avoid such problems that an inter-institutional meeting has been proposed by The Commonwealth of Learning. The meeting will bring together a small number of concerned institutions as well as representatives of COL to attempt to identify issues that need to be discussed, to begin to formulate responses to those issues and, in accordance with the principle of collaboration enunciated above, to start to develop agreements about institutional responsibilities in areas related to electronic delivery.

2. Electronic Delivery of Courses

The possibilities for electronic delivery seem to fall broadly into three categories:

- (a) Courses offered through the Internet;
- (b) Other types of electronic offering (such as satellite, CD-ROM and others); and
- (c) Brokered and/or collaborative offerings.

Some issues affect all of these categories while others are restricted to one of them. This discussion paper will attempt to identify both types of issues.

3. Issues for Discussion

3.1 Courses offered through the Internet

- (a) Materials - the primary questions here are those of protection of institutional and authors' rights over course material and of proper clearance of rights for third party copyright material incorporated into courses.

The protection of institutional and individual rights in the face of greater ability to manipulate material provided by electronic course development and of wider and more flexible offering of courses is an issue to which institutions will need to pay particular attention. Alongside this, the offering of courses to students from other jurisdictions and across national boundaries will involve careful attention to the rights of copyright holders. Institutions will need to ensure that, before offering courses via the Internet, appropriate clearances have been obtained, a legal and ethical as well as a budgetary issue.

- (b) Data - protection of personal and perhaps institutional

privacy will become an issue as the possibility exists of revealing, for example, student names and other information through the Internet. Thus, clear institutional policies will need to be developed in this area.

(c) Institutional Responsibilities - The broad question of institutional responsibility for support of remote - increasingly, very remote - students is likely to become a major issue. Part of the solution to this problem may be found in the development of brokering or collaborative delivery models to be discussed later; but it may be possible to arrive at an understanding of the nature of remote student support provided by responsible institutions that can be incorporated, for example, in agreements related to credit transfer.

3.2 Other Electronic Delivery Systems

While the development and delivery methods may differ from those of courses via the Internet, the major issues related to these systems are very similar to those for Internet courses.

3.3 Brokered and/or Collaborative Offerings

In these methods of delivery, the primary issues are probably those related to the relationship of collaborating institutions to one another and to the students they serve. The issues listed above exist in this area too although their application may be somewhat different. Additional questions that arise are frequently very basic ones such as which institution will register particular students; what support and/or services will be provided by each institution; what rights do institutions have over course materials developed by collaborators; etc. The point that needs to be re-emphasised here is the paramount need for clear and appropriate inter-institutional agreements that leave no room for misunderstanding among institutional partners.

4. Credit Transfer

In a sense, the issue that underlies all of those noted is that of the facilitation of credit transfer. The growing possibility that students will soon be able to acquire credit from several institutions leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that the students will wish to apply such credit to a usable credential. It is thus incumbent upon institutions to provide for this eventuality. COL has recently commissioned a feasibility study for the establishment of a Commonwealth credit bank; but this is an issue that extends beyond the Commonwealth and should be addressed in that context. Another issue related to credit transfer has already been raised above - that is, the use of credit transfer as a means of encouraging institutions serving students outside their own jurisdictions to abide by acceptable standards of support and instruction.

5. Conclusion

It is unlikely that firm conclusions in any area will emerge from the Vancouver Meeting. What could emerge, however, is the basis for

further consultation leading to an eventual agreement about the responsibilities of institutions in electronic development and delivery of courses, about methods of proceeding in concert with others, etc.

GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance and assistance to students thinking of enrolling in distance education courses offered by institutions that are remote from the region in which they live. These will sometimes be offered through or with validation provided by a local institution in which case the answers to the questions that follow should be easy to obtain or provided in a locally available package of material. In the case of courses offered, for example, through the Internet, however, this may not be the case.

In either case, students should be made aware that their first recourse should be their local, accredited institution as the most likely source of much of the information they need and as the most convenient source for verifying the information provided. This information can be obtained by asking the following questions:

1. What is the content and design of the course? For example, is a course outline available giving detailed information on such matters as entry requirements, length, level, contents and assessment scheme for a course?

2. What institutional regulations affect enrolment in and completion of the course? For example, what regulations exist with respect to such matters as breaks of study, extensions, plagiarism, grade appeals, etc?

3. (a) How current is the content of the course? Has it been recently revised to take account of changes in the subject?

(b) How relevant is the course to the student's goals?

4. What credit does the course carry? This question has three primary aspects:

(a) How many credit point does it carry at the provider institution?

(b) How does this credit apply to programmes within the provider institution?

(c) Does the course carry transfer credit to programmes at other institutions?

Students should note that questions (b) and (c) frequently apply to courses not carrying credit towards a credential as well as those carrying formal credit.

5. What support is provided to students who enrol in the course? This involves students access to tuition, assessment, counselling, etc.

6. What are the mechanics of gaining access to the course and to the support provided? This question covers the all-important question of cost to students. For example:

- (a) What are the direct and indirect costs of the course?
- (b) What equipment (e.g. computers) is required for the course?
- (c) If computers are required, are students responsible for line charges?
- (d) Is required equipment rentable/purchasable from the provider institution?

Other questions include:

- (a) By what means do students communicate with their tutors or with other students?
- (b) By what means do students gain access to research resources and other forms of support?

7. What provision, with or without fee and/or equipment rental refund, is there for withdrawal from the course?

The above questions do not necessarily provide a comprehensive view of what student should know about courses in which they wish to enrol but rather a series of guidelines to enable students to make informed decisions about such courses.

GUIDE TO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

This guide attempts to divide institutional responsibilities into two categories, those to students and, where appropriate, those to partner institutions.

1. Responsibilities to Students

- (a) Responsible marketing and student recruitment practices with particular reference to the provision of accurate and comprehensive information in at least the areas covered by the questions in the student guide.
- (b) Course development, review and revision process that is adequate to ensure that courses are appropriate for the students to whom they are made available and that they have access to the materials needed to achieve their course goals and objectives.
- (c) Provision of appropriate support for enrolled students in areas such as advising, instruction, assessment, examination and protection of student privacy.
- (d) Where courses involve computer mediated instruction, clarity about the rights of both students and institutions to materials produced by students.
- (e) An assurance that students will be able to complete programmes once they have begun.

(f) Confidentiality of information provided to institutions by students.

(g) Provision of appropriate faculty and staff training and continuing professional development in the use of electronic systems for materials development and delivery, and for student support.

2. Responsibilities to Partner Institutions

(a) Clear delineation of inter-institutional agreements before they are put into effect.

(b) Implementation of the above assumes that:

(i) all aspects of contract activities required of all parties will be precisely defined;

(ii) appropriate arrangements for the protection of intellectual property rights and copyright for all institutions and individuals developing materials under the contract are specified;

(iii) contracts will be fully costed to ensure that all necessary costs to all partners are covered and that the cost benefits of the proposed arrangements are clear; and

(iv) clearly defined and appropriate institutional resources for carrying out the terms of the contract are set aside for the period of each contract and, where necessary, to enable students to complete programmes after a contract has expired (see 1 (e) above).

DEVELOPING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The previous documents have emphasised the importance of inter-institutional partnerships in the development of systems to deal with the remote delivery of courses and programmes. The last section attempted to outline some of the requirements for the development of successful partnerships defining the responsibilities of the parties to such agreements. In discussing the practical issues related to the development of inter-institutional partnerships, the group emphasised the need for demonstration projects that would both provide useful courses that could be expanded into larger programmes and show the efficacy of a collaborative approach to remote delivery. It also discussed at length the role of international agencies, in particular COL, in acting as a broker to facilitate such activities.

In this connection, it was agreed that:

1. COL should attempt to bring together both individuals and institutions to deal with specific problems that could be translated into courses.

2. It is important, however, that such courses should be parts of existing programmes or programmes under development and thus be

usable in all participating institutions or at least transferable as widely as possible.

3. The issue of credit transfer should be dealt with as part of the initial agreement to collaborate on development and delivery of particular courses along with all other details of the agreement.

4. Given the need for such demonstration projects, every effort would be made to develop such a partnership agreement in the very near future.

The group agreed that, as discussion of these basic documents proceed, COL would attempt to take a lead in developing a model partnership and thus to bring together interested individuals and institutions to accomplish this.

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