

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE INSTITUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

All public higher education institutions and related stakeholders were invited to prepare submissions to be presented to the CHE Task Team. The focus of these was an analysis of the changing role and nature of distance education, with special reference to access, in the light of global trends towards lifelong learning and the new information and communications technologies. A total of 24 higher education institutions and related organisations presented their submissions to the CHE Task Team on 13 and 14 May 2003. (See Appendix 1 for list of stakeholder institutions and organisations that made presentations and written submissions to the CHE Task Team). The key findings and perspectives from the presentations and written submissions were then synthesised. This chapter presents these institutional perspectives which serve to frame the analysis of distance education practice presented in Chapter Three.

Analysis of submissions reveals that there is an increasing range of programmes which incorporate distance education methods, particularly as more institutions have started to integrate use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into their delivery strategies and as increasing numbers of institutions target non-traditional students, who require more flexible forms of delivery. A close reading of submissions does suggest, however, that proposed changes to the funding formula and current restrictions on predominantly face-to-face institutions offering programmes through distance education coloured the submissions. Institutions appeared unwilling to make critical self-reflective comment, other than making a few veiled criticisms of other institutions or posing hypothetical problems (from which they then distanced themselves). It seems unlikely that distance education in its various forms in all the universities and technikons around the country is an unqualified success, but this summary draws only on the relatively guarded ways in which institutions described themselves in answer to the questions. Richer information about specific programmes is captured in the case study reports, which have been summarised in Chapter Three.

DEFINING AND DESCRIBING DISTANCE EDUCATION

The views of institutions in presentations represented a variety of ‘takes’ on the definition of distance education and have resulted in the proliferation of terms. However, they represent a fair understanding of distance education as it is practised in South Africa at the moment – from correspondence style (with or without learning support), to ‘contact’-rich and highly supported distance education (with or without use of ICT and other technologies).

There was a variety of approaches to, and understandings of, distance education. Few institutions actually referred to their distance education or flexible delivery programmes as ‘distance education’. In some cases, this was because their flexible delivery strategies have few or no distance components to them (for example, in block release programmes). In others, though, reluctance to declare a programme as ‘distance’ may have arisen from a desire

to avoid lower subsidy rates granted for distance education delivery. Many providers argued that there was a high degree of contact in their various approaches, even if the contact was not face-to-face. A minority of institutions used ‘resource-based learning’ and ‘open learning’ as synonyms for ‘distance education’, while others used these terms as alternatives.

The term ‘distance education’ for most institutions and organisations implied that there was a distance between the learner and the institution/teacher – a distance that was often physical (spatial), but could also be temporal. Sometimes use of distance education methods was driven by increasing use of ICTs; in other cases it was a consequence of institutions trying to increase access to people beyond their traditional student base.

Many submissions emphasised the centrality of learning materials in distinguishing distance education from face-to-face education, arguing that quality distance education requires a very different design and development process of learning materials in order to obtain proper structuring of the learning experience and to enable a dialogue or conversation with the learner, between learners, and between the lecturer and learners. A few stressed that, in distance education, learning resources need to be more carefully designed than is necessary in face-to-face education. They argued that this is necessary to ensure that materials are accessible, to anticipate learners’ questions and problems, and to scaffold learning. With regard to centrality of materials, a distinction was drawn between ‘resource-based learning’ and ‘distance education’. In the former, the teacher was argued to have more of a role than in the latter. Only one institution did not see a difference between distance and face-to-face education in the course design process. One submission emphasised that, in distance education there is a reduced role for lecturers and a delegation of teaching to lower level staff such as tutors.

The kinds of terms used by providers for varieties of their distance education provision sometimes refer to a principled approach (for example, ‘lifelong learning’ or ‘flexible learning’) and sometimes to use of particular kinds of methods (for example, ‘block release’ or ‘mixed mode’). Given this, it would appear useful for institutions, in referring to the kinds of distance education that they offer, to consider both approach (for example, flexibility of timetable to meet the needs of part-time students, access for people who need to work and study) and methods.

The majority of submissions stressed the blurring of the distinction between face-to-face and distance education. Submissions stressed that there could not be a monopoly in use of distance education methods, and that face-to-face institutions could not ignore the wealth of possibilities offered by mixed-mode or blended e-learning. This was seen as essential in terms of opening access and increasing graduate output. The general emphasis was that contact institutions should have freedom to use whichever modes, methods, and resources are most effective for purpose, context, and the needs of students, the region, and the programme. A few institutions stressed their desire to meet regional needs through distance education programmes. Thus, in general, emphasis was placed on the need to use all possible means to reach learners with quality and transformed teaching approaches.

It was argued by some that mechanisms to steer the system towards successful transformation cannot be based on definitions that do not reflect current reality. Thus, it was proposed that it is almost impossible – and perhaps also inappropriate – to think of distance and face-to-face education as two distinctly different modes of delivery. Instead, a few submissions suggested that one outcome of current ‘transformation’ processes should be an integrated higher education model incorporating both distance and face-to-face delivery modes in individual institutions. This should be encouraged rather than curtailed through macro policy frameworks and alignment mechanisms. Instead, the emphasis should be on quality assurance and cost efficiency.

A concern was expressed that, while institutions had tried to respond creatively and innovatively to needs on the ground and had developed more flexible programmes, official policy had remained static and trapped by crude definitions. Some institutions expressed anger that, in their perception, instead of rewarding responsiveness and valuing efforts to provide extensive contact and support for remote students, the Department of Education has apparently drawn distinctions between face-to-face and distance education on the basis of whether or not tuition occurred on campus. The feeling was that the realities of what is happening demand a more finely grained distinction between various forms of delivery, ranging from full contact, on campus, full-time students to ‘correspondence’ students. This is particularly important because of the way the funding formula currently operates. A few submissions noted, for example, that ‘contact-at-a-distance’ students should not be earning distance education subsidies. It was felt that the focus should be on creating increased access, equity, and educational viability for all learners and not on differentiating between modes of delivery.

Many institutions emphasised the need to stay abreast of global developments, with a view to being able to compete effectively with international institutions. South African higher education was argued to be a unique and internationally marketable commodity, suggesting that we should look beyond our borders for these markets. Some institutions felt as though their hands were tied, while ‘outsiders take the prizes’. Many pointed out that over-regulation is ineffective and cost-intensive, while others stressed that it inhibits innovation. Thus, institutions felt that space must be created for an emergent model of ‘off-campus’ education. A decentralised system may have centralised programme development and learning material duplication systems, while providing some or all of the following services through regional or local centres: registration, student record-keeping, tutorial services, student counselling, learning outcome assessment, and student enquiry services.

INTEGRATING ICT INTO EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The need to distinguish between distance education and programmes which integrate ICT was stressed, as was increasing use of ICT in all modes of delivery of higher education. One institution suggested that the role of online education requires urgent consideration and

support at a policy level. It proposed that South Africa should be considering the creation of parastatal bodies to encourage and support online education.

Perhaps because of these trends, there seems to have been a proliferation of terms to describe distance education. Similarly, many submissions were characterised by the use of superlatives and hyperbole. The integration of ICT, in particular, seems to have been described in exaggerated terms: 'highly innovative', 'sophisticated', 'resource-rich', 'multi-directional dynamic interactions', and 'holistic' are just a sample of the language used when discussing this topic. Terms used were sometimes also obscure. While it is appreciated that institutions are enthusiastic about innovative forms of delivery and want to make a (probably legitimate) case for equitable funding, use of such language makes it difficult to get a meaningful sense of their actual practice.

Many submissions seemed to focus on beliefs about what technology could achieve in theory, rather than actual experience of introducing it in programmes. For example, it was argued by one institution that technology allows students more freedom to study at any pace, from anywhere, and at any time. This seems problematic, as it is more likely that design and organisation of a learning programme, and not technology, is what will allow this freedom, although, of course, strategic use of ICT can enhance this design and organisation.

Various submissions tried to distinguish between courses which in some way used ICT, those in which ICT is integrated, and web-based or digitally delivered courses. Terms suggested were 'adjunct mode', 'mixed mode', 'online mode', 'technology-supplemented', 'technology-enhanced', 'technology-integrated', and 'technology-based'. However, few institutions gave any sense of what such terms mean in practice. There was, however, a clear trend towards increased integration of ICT into both distance education and face-to-face programmes. A few institutions had examples of distance education programmes that were delivered entirely using ICT. More often, however, there was reference to use of ICT or satellite broadcasts as an aspect of distance education programmes. Increased use of ICTs has often resulted in providers moving into distance education without realising it. Where this has happened, it has largely been propelled by student demand and has been a natural process. This means that provision needs to be made for such developments, and there should be some flexibility regarding who may, or may not, offer distance education.

Some institutions cited ways in which ICT has improved both distance and face-to-face programmes. One way in which this was claimed to have happened is through greater focus on instructional design. For example, one institution stated that study material developed for distance education students was being used for on-campus students as well. Others felt that, because lecturers are given support in development of 'virtual classrooms', they are provided space to interrogate their own 'common sense' notions of teaching and learning, derived from their experiences of transmission-oriented delivery. As a result, they are now re-orienting their 'paper-based material' to be oriented to active individual and group activity. The fact that they had to make a case for introducing distance education methods to the governing structure forced them to reflect on methodologies, and probably improved the quality of

teaching. Likewise, another institution argued that the introduction of ICT had meant that academic planning had improved for all programmes, because these now had to be developed in advance. Introduction of ICT was also said to have enabled students on face-to-face programmes to become more independent learners. Technology was seen to be important in enhancing flexibility since it enables students to be less bound by time and place. Finally, use of ICT in improving administrative systems was often cited as a further benefit.

In relation to ICT and online education, a few institutions stressed the need for a cost-effective bandwidth. Their view was that, to increase use of technology, a special drive is required by the Department of Education to negotiate for a decrease in the cost of Internet connections. Motivations were also provided for national coordination and resource sharing, as well as working with national and provincial departments of communication, science and technology, and education.

Some institutions saw the integration of ICT as important from a marketing point of view. There were some voices of caution. For example, some submissions noted that the introduction of new technologies into programmes is as likely to disempower as empower learners; and these technologies often make it easy to create poor materials that look good.

Somewhat worrying in submissions were instances of loose and inaccurate use of the term 'constructivism'. Some institutions even equated mere use of technology with constructivist learning. This would suggest that these institutions need to reflect more critically on their approach to teaching and learning, and the way the various methods they use either support or do not support their basic approach. However, in general there appeared to be little evidence of much critical thinking in this regard and a fair amount of overstatement of the value of ICTs *per se*, with insufficient thought given to pedagogical implications.

CONVERGENCE OR BLURRING

Based on submissions, it appears most institutions think that, while there has been a blurring of the distinction between face-to-face and distance education provision, mainly as a result of the use of ICT in both types of programme, there has not yet been convergence. 'Convergence' would imply that all education is broadly similar, whereas most institutions were clear that face-to-face and distance education methods still have distinct roles to play. Several providers felt that institutional differentiation is still necessary, but that there is a continuum of provision ranging from totally face-to-face programmes with no self-study to entirely correspondence programmes with no contact. Hardly any programmes fit either of these extremes, but most are closer to one end of the continuum than the other. However, submissions generally reflect a view that there are no distinct boundaries between distance and face-to-face education. Rather, role differentiation will occur either in response to a need for large-scale provision of self-study learning materials with relatively little lecturer facilitation, or to a need for lecturer-driven learning content and process. 'Blurring' of the distinction is most apparent in postgraduate programmes. A small minority of institutions

argued for convergence, saying that teaching and learning provision is identical in the various delivery modes that they use.

The demands of mixed mode provision in traditionally face-to-face institutions are considerable. Many face-to-face institutions seemed to be arguing that they want to use ICT and to engage in different ways of teaching and learning, which might or might not mean less contact than they have had in the past, and would probably mean less lecturing, but is still very different from what they understand as distance education. Mixed-mode programmes with strong student tutorial support systems were seen as demanding infrastructural resources – such as setting up regional learning centres with administrative staff, learning resources, books, and computers. In addition, mixed mode was argued to make different kinds of demands on academic staff, such as writing self-instructional material, and reviewing and re-writing it. In a face-to-face institution, distance learning and mixed-mode learning require a parallel system of student administration and finance.

Because of this, one submission argued that, in face-to-face institutions, the emphasis in terms of ‘blended’ and ‘mixed mode’ programmes, which have components of synchronous and asynchronous learning, should be on:

- Students who are in ‘experiential’ learning programmes where they cannot attend during the day;
- Helping full-time students to revisit lecture material or to benefit from advantages brought by new technologies; or
- Offering courses not available anywhere else.

Many institutions emphasised the need to offer programmes in partnership. This was seen as being essential to ensure financial viability, and as increasingly being enabled by developments in ICT (through technology-enabled sharing of materials development). It was felt by many that economies of scale can only be achieved through such partnerships. One submission proposed the development of more general structures to provide greater support to institutions offering distance education programmes (in terms of sharing infrastructure, capacity-building on administrative and financial systems, course and materials development, and so on). Indeed, there was repeated emphasis on incentives to share facilities, which will save costs and result in benefits to students through greater diversity of academic input.

One submission cautioned that, while the distinction between face-to-face and distance education was becoming blurred in urban environments, this was not the case in rural areas, where learners had hardly any access to electricity, and were solely dependent on printed course materials received. Lack of access to libraries and to fellow students were seen by many distance education students as aspects that continue to distinguish distance education from face-to-face education.

SAUVCA argued in its oral presentation that the current dominant model of higher education, with predominantly face-to-face programmes, can never become mass provision, because costs to state and student are too high. Therefore, if South Africa is serious about massively increasing access as the number of qualifying students expands it needs to change the model of provision.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTITUTIONS

Based on submissions, it is evident that there is an ongoing need for differentiated institutions and that, for the foreseeable future, there will be two broad categories – dedicated distance education institutions and predominantly face-to-face institutions. Dedicated distance education institutions were seen as being able to offer distance education on scales that other institutions could not. Thus, some argued that role differentiation between institutional types should take into consideration a need for large-scale provision of self-teaching materials with relatively little lecturer ‘facilitation’, rather than being based on lecturer-driven learning content and processes where there was frequency of contact between lecturer and student, whether or not geographical remoteness is a feature of such programmes. This should not, however, prevent face-to-face institutions from offering programmes using flexible modes of delivery.

One argument for institutional differentiation proposed that, for the purposes of strategic planning at a national level, the dedicated distance institutions should:

- Play a role in building a national infrastructure and networks, in collaboration with face-to-face institutions;
- Cater for large groups of students across the country and beyond;
- Service the needs of working students, or others who are not able to attend a face-to-face institution;
- Allow for lower entry requirements; and
- Offer programmes that are more suited to correspondence mode.

However, it should also be understood that the functions of single distance education institutions were not always clearly defined in the submissions. For example, it was pointed out in oral presentations that, although traditionally dedicated distance education institutions cater for working adults or people with responsibilities which make full-time study impossible, increasingly they are having to cater for young people whose primary identity is that of full-time student.

Simultaneously, it was argued that traditionally face-to-face institutions should work within their sites, responding to local needs, ensuring face-to-face delivery by university staff (or approved staff), and working with smaller numbers, to provide:

- Access to non-academic support services such as sporting facilities, clinics, and cultural activities;
- Services focusing on the needs of younger people studying full-time;⁷ and
- Programmes where there is a need for regular workshops, practical laboratory work, and contact tuition in a face-to-face environment.

THE ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

One major role for distance education was seen to be increasing access to higher education. Distance education was seen as crucial for increasing access for poorer students, as fees are generally lower (although this seems typically to apply in dedicated distance education institutions), as well as for students who do not meet the entrance requirements of face-to-face institutions. Distance education can reach students unable to attend timetabled, contact residential classes (such as working people, mature students, and people living in remote places). In particular, the importance to the economy of in-service or ongoing professional training for working people was stressed, with an emphasis largely, but not exclusively, on teacher development. Distance education was seen as important to rural development because it enables people to learn without moving from rural areas. It also increases access to postgraduate programmes. The contribution that distance education can make to socio-economic development was stressed in many submissions.

Besides increasing access, many institutions felt that distance education can play a role in improving the quality of learning programmes. They felt this partly because of the greater effort that is (or should be) put into developing learning materials and thinking about instructional design in distance education programmes. Distance education was seen as important for quality assurance, because it forces institutions to be more rigorous. The tendency for materials to be designed in teams was seen as positive. Increased competition between providers was seen as healthy. However, many comments on how distance education improves practice seemed to reflect a generic list of best practice, rather than being related specifically to distance education.

Many argued in favour of a general desire to add value and make education more accessible, or what one institution referred to as 'academic entrepreneurship'. The 'massification' of higher education and increasing diversification in terms of pace, place, and space, among other issues, were seen as having provoked greater flexibility in institutional responses to student requirements and preferences. In this context, distance education was felt by some to be the best mode of responding to an increasingly diverse and sophisticated student population.

Distance education was seen as important for enhancing institutions' profiles nationally and internationally. It was also seen as important for promoting inter-institutional collaboration.

⁷ In oral presentations, it was clear that this is changing. For example, the profile of students at the University of South Africa (UNISA) is changing. There are many more young students who study full-time, and who, increasingly are demanding the kinds of facilities more characteristic of face-to-face institutions.

Many submissions referred to the cost-effectiveness of distance education, in terms of economies of scale and using academic and administrative staff more efficiently.

PERCEIVED DISADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Taken together, the submissions provide a comprehensive list of potential problems in the implementation of distance education. All of the points mentioned below need to be considered when developing quality criteria and minimum standards for distance education provision. There was a strong focus on quality in several submissions, with most institutions stressing that quality of provision should be the basis for departmental decision-making. There was, in many submissions, a high expectation of what quality criteria and quality processes could achieve.

A few institutions thought that there were no disadvantages to distance education, other than the fact that student enrolments in such programmes would generate lower subsidies. Others focused on learning skills, arguing that students with weak reading and academic ability or auditory learning styles struggle in a distance education environment. These submissions argued that the affective component of learning could be compromised, and that the lack of extra stimulation for and by good students which often takes place informally in face-to-face education is problematic. Lack of interaction between students was seen as a disadvantage, as students would not be able to share ideas, discoveries, successes, and failures, as well as provide mutual support. Thus learners could easily feel isolated and lose motivation. It was argued that it is also difficult to develop a rapport with lecturers in distance education programmes. The low success rate of traditional correspondence education was also cited as a factor of concern.

Concerns were expressed that, if distance education provision is not effectively conceptualised, managed, and administered, it could remain a fairly expensive and unaffordable enterprise. Such a condition might be aggravated by duplication of programme provision, proliferation in the market of poor quality learning programmes, and spreading infrastructure and resources for learner support thinly. Lack of coordination could also reduce the impact of efforts and resources spent in the design and production of sophisticated learning materials that are properly contextualised, outcomes-based and responsive to learners' needs. In addition, if distance education is not well coordinated, innovatively designed, and linked optimally to ICT, appropriate institutional forms, and delivery modes, this mode of provision could widen the gap between learners and educators. The consequence of this could be to complicate the learning experience, thus frustrating and confusing many learners.

Some argued that, at times, distance education programmes had been introduced by contact institutions responding to market demand, without necessarily providing quality tuition. These submissions emphasised that distance education was seen by some as a 'cash cow'. It was felt that distance education might be perceived as a relatively easy means of supplementing income, retaining growth, and complying with the required demographic balances in the student body. Programmes offered to other developing countries were seen

as often opportunistic and driven by a profit motive rather than quality considerations. Added to this was a concern that many institutions are not ready to deal with the challenge of under-prepared students, and attempt to develop learning materials which ‘spoon-feed’ students and ‘dumb down’ programmes. Homogenised learning materials were seen as dangerous, particularly in certain disciplines. A concern was expressed that students were not required to make use of libraries.

Access to infrastructure was cited by many as a problem for students in terms of online or computer-based distance education, while administrative and logistical difficulties were also mentioned. The fact that distance education was introduced in order to ensure that the ‘cultural milieu’ of some historically white campuses remained unchanged was seen as a problem by some.

In oral presentations, several providers who were engaged in provision of large scale teacher education programmes, some of which had been criticised in the National Teacher Audit, pointed out that they were in ‘teach-out’ phase with these programmes (i.e. they were not registering any new students, but simply seeing existing students through).

CONDITIONS AND CRITERIA FOR PROVISION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT FACE-TO-FACE INSTITUTIONS

With regard to conditions and criteria which should govern provision of distance education at predominantly face-to-face institutions, there was acceptance that programmes should meet agreed quality criteria and be aligned with their institutional missions and capacity. However, there was considerable objection to the requirement of meeting regional and/or national needs. The main difficulty expressed with this is that the logic both of distance education and higher education more generally works against a regional approach in most disciplinary areas. Even when institutions supported the notion that regional clearing houses should decide on required programmes for the region, the question of how to involve dedicated distance education institutions that operate nationally remained unresolved.

The criterion in the National Plan on Higher Education that refers to duplication and overlap of distance education and face-to-face programmes was viewed as highly problematic in many submissions, mainly because it will be extremely difficult to adjudicate and could stifle innovation and quality. It will be extremely difficult for the Department of Education to distinguish between types of programmes, based on the type of information that administrative systems contain. Although some programmes in different institutions carry the same or similar names, knowledge choices, theoretical orientation and pedagogy vary across these institutions, which could result in widely differing programmes.

Various submissions argued strongly that it is legitimate for one institution to want to offer only distance education programmes, but not legitimate to stop other institutions from using a range of modes. Some argued that imposing rules about use of different modes

of delivery would stifle innovation and quality, as well as forcing homogenisation on the system. Others stressed that many distance education programmes in face-to-face institutions are chosen by students because they offer more support than their equivalents in dedicated distance education institutions, as well as because students prefer the specific orientation of the programme to that offered by the dedicated distance institutions. Preventing face-to-face institutions from offering their programmes to the wider community through distance education was seen as detrimental to the interests of the nation's socio-economic development. Relating to this, various submissions stressed that the prospective student must have a choice in selecting an institution for his or her studies.

Some submissions argued that preventing face-to-face institutions from implementing the lessons learnt from distance education – many of which are indispensable for making educationally sound use of modern technology – would run counter to international developments, and would anchor South African higher education in the past. Many submissions also stressed the need for improved student support at the dedicated distance institutions.

However, this suggested criterion was given qualified support by the dedicated distance education institutions, which felt that it would be counter-productive and place an unwarranted strain on scarce resources to allow too much duplication. These institutions felt that the new single dedicated distance education institution should be given a chance to find its feet first, and explore the advantages of being the only single distance education institution (as well as being a cross-sectoral, comprehensive distance education institution).

Few submissions proposed additional criteria for contact institutions wishing to offer distance education programmes. Those that did emphasised the capacity to provide support, and stressed that institutions should not try to offer programmes for which they will not be able to offer sufficient individual contact. A further possible consideration was that, where institutions have an established and proven research capacity, they might be well placed to offer some 'distance' programmes, particularly at postgraduate level. One institution suggested that there need to be specific quality criteria for courses offered in 'distance mode'.

THE FUNDING FRAMEWORK

Only two institutions supported maintaining input subsidies for distance education at 50% of that of full-time equivalent (FTE) students in contact programmes. Even these were very qualified, arguing that it would be difficult to apply, given the lack of a clear distinction between the programmes. One institution argued that, if parity could not be achieved, at least 75% of the input subsidy of face-to-face students should be given for distance programmes. However, a submission made by a student organisation supported the proposals, arguing that institutions should be discouraged from seeing distance education as merely a money-making scheme.

The vast majority of submissions argued vehemently against any degree of differentiation in funding distance and face-to-face programmes. A primary basis for this argument was the blurring of distinctions between different modes, or, as some expressed it, convergence between modes (already described above). Some argued that open and flexible models would become the prevailing models, especially in programmes with large numbers. It was felt that, in many instances, programmes currently offered by distance education institutions and claimed as distance education actually represent as much, or in some cases even more, contact than some programmes currently offered by contact institutions and claimed as contact education. Thus, institutional submissions strongly rejected the proposal for lower subsidies for distance education, arguing that input costs are high, and lower subsidies could lead to lower quality of programme development and delivery.

The main argument was that maintaining the input subsidy at 50% will force traditionally distance institutions to limit themselves to correspondence with limited support, and will prevent predominantly face-to-face institutions from innovating and providing flexible delivery. Both Technikon SA and UNISA argued strongly that distance education reaches vast numbers of students from traditionally disadvantaged communities with limited access to higher education. These students require more support than students who are likely to be more adequately prepared for higher education and, in order for such support to be mainstreamed, significant investments need to be made.

UNISA also expressed concern that emphasis on efficiency might move institutions to apply stricter entrance criteria, thereby denying access to historically disadvantaged students. Another concern was that the number of qualifications awarded might be used as a basis for calculating teaching output subsidies and not FTE degree-credit students. This, it was argued, would cause discrimination against distance education institutions that often, as part of rationalisation and collaboration with other institutions, offer subjects with limited student numbers or specialised courses as part of programmes of other institutions. Distance education institutions also have a large percentage of students who only complete individual courses for non-degree purposes and therefore never complete a qualification. By successfully completing a course, students obtain knowledge that merits subsidisation because it increases knowledge and skills. They recommended that the Ministry should consider replacing weighted completed qualifications with weighted successful FTE degree-credit students or at least basing part of the teaching output subsidy on weighted FTE-degree-credit students.

Many face-to-face institutions saw the proposals as a threat to mixed mode delivery, and as such strongly opposed them. They argued that quality student support was costly. Mixed-mode delivery was argued to be desirable in terms of students' needs for flexibility, but was felt to cost the same as, if not more than, contact tuition. Flexible or 'off-campus' programmes currently were said to have as much contact as traditional contact programmes, and students were said to get considerable support.

A significant number of submissions linked increased subsidies of distance education (or mixed-mode or flexible delivery) to ICT infrastructure. They emphasised the high cost burdens that this places on both institutional types, in terms of investment, maintenance, and staff training and development.

Many submissions questioned whether distance education was in fact cheaper than contact education, and argued that there is mounting evidence to the contrary, some referring to international research which was not cited in the submission. Although some conceded that unit costs can be brought down where economies of scale exist, others argued that quality courseware is very costly to develop. Many institutions also disputed whether running costs are lower for distance education (or mixed-mode or flexible delivery), citing student support, academic development, learner resource centres, tele-tutoring, online teaching, chat-rooms, tutorial groups, open learning courseware and so on as costs of delivery. These submissions argued that these all require upfront investments in order to broaden the range of possibilities for students, and also carry extensive maintenance costs, which, according to some submissions, were in excess of the costs for face-to-face institutions. One submission also mentioned that increased numbers of skilled and efficient administrative staff and delivery systems needed to be in place in order to ensure effectiveness.

Nearly all submissions supported the notion of a phased-in approach to parity of funding, with some proposing a phase-in period of three years and others up to ten. Presumably recommendations are based on an acknowledgement that, with a finite amount of money available, such a move would decrease the average subsidy for a full-time equivalent on a contact programme (according to one university, by 11%). However, some submissions stressed that dedicated distance institutions must prove that they are increasing student support as these subsidies increase. A few institutions made specific proposals for sliding scales in relation to student numbers or other mechanisms for differentiation. These are dealt with thoroughly in Chapter Five, and are therefore not discussed here.

INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES PERTAINING TO PROVISION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Few institutions had formal policies related to distance education or the use of ICT in education, although some were in the process of drawing up such policies. A few had policies which described their overall teaching and learning strategy, and included a focus on flexible delivery of programmes and learner support. No policies were mentioned which included administrative and staffing issues in relation to distance education, although there is reason to believe that some institutions do in fact have such policies.

PREDICTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION PROVISION

Several predominantly face-to-face institutions predict that the number of distance education programmes they offer will either remain constant or increase. Clarity about the conditions for offering distance education programmes therefore becomes critical. Many institutions felt

that if they did increase distance education or mixed-mode provision it would be in key strategic or niche areas. This did not necessarily mean that other institutions would not also offer programmes in that niche area – they would simply bring a different focus to bear upon it.

Institutions also predicted increased integration of ICT into their programmes. They argued, therefore that there is a need at national level to:

- Develop and use guidelines to ensure quality in the integration of ICT; and
- Coordinate projects which establish the necessary infrastructure for efficient use of ICT within and across institutions.

In oral presentations, institutions discussed the importance of establishing a network of technologically well-equipped centres. They believe that this kind of coordination will be important for facilitating a broader introduction of ICT in cost-efficient ways.

CONCLUSION

The stakeholder submissions provided useful insights into how institutions and organisations perceive distance education, as well as how they are describing their own practices. They show very clear trends towards the increasing use of various distance education methods and approaches. However, as stated above, the comments in this chapter need to be interpreted critically, in conjunction with the case studies and detailed costing studies, to balance institutional statements with research into practice.