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The role of study centres in open and distance education: A glimpse of the future

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This chapter examines the development of study centres in supporting the learner in distance education. It is suggested that there is a need to review the part played by these centres in distance teaching systems, in particular in the context of rapidly developing communications technology.

Heap and Hibbert (1995) quote the Nobel Laureate and inventor of holography, Denis Gabor, as saying '*Futures are difficult to predict but they can be invented*'. Today, with the rapid development and availability of information technology in the home, at least for some students in richer countries, it could be argued that the future for study centres is clear . . . **extinction!** The argument would be that each individual student would have his or her own communications technology at home or readily available at work. This would enable them to access the powerful information banks to retrieve data and teaching materials, to contact tutors, course authors and fellow students studying the same course anywhere in the world. In such a situation there may be no need for a study centre where such facilities are provided or where students would meet each other face-to-face. Of course access to communications technology is not total, even in rich countries, and there is some evidence to suggest that even when students report they have access to a personal computer (PC) and modem the quality of access can be quite poor; for example, they may have the use of a PC at work but no access outside office hours or for personal study.

The functions of study centres

It would be interesting to develop a taxonomy of study centres in open and distance education, classifying them according to their different functions and purposes to determine how social, demographic and political factors influence their structure and their role in overall national education provision; but in this chapter a few examples only will be used to illustrate general points. A good deal has already been written (there are over 80 entries on the ICDL database (1995) under the heading 'study centre'), notably by Castro *et al.* (1985) who described the Australian context, and so there is a rich literature about roles, student usage, and costs. This chapter examines some of the issues relating to the use of study centres which distance teaching organisations need to address with a degree of urgency as they plan for the future.

First, there are a number of fundamental questions to be asked about the roles and functions of study centres in distance and open learning. Their main purpose to date has been to provide some or all of the following support and facilities to students and to the general public:

- a place for individual study in appropriate surroundings and at appropriate times
- library facilities
- an opportunity for students to meet with the distance education institution's administrative staff
- an opportunity to meet fellow students on the same or a different course
- a focus for students' association activities
- a source of information, guidance and counselling to the general public in a local area
- access to technology
- access to local guidance and counselling, individual and group tuition, group viewing and listening
- facilities for taking examinations.

Only rarely (and the Indira Gandhi National Open University is an example of this) do study centres fulfil all these purposes. In most other institutions, study centres offer only a selection of these services, although some have 'showcase' centres in areas of high population.

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There are major differences between study centres worldwide. These can be grouped under three headings: ownership, financing and collaboration.

Ownership

In some institutions, study centres are owned by the distance teaching organisation and run by its staff. At the other extreme (as in the Open University of the United Kingdom (OU UK)) study centres, for the most part, are suites (if one is lucky) of rooms in another institution's building, usually rented during the evening or on Saturdays. In one or two cases in the OU UK such rented premises are in thriving adult and community centres or public libraries, but all too often they are in dreary, poorly equipped schools or Colleges of Further Education. Some OU regional centres also include study centre facilities, where students may also have access to regional centre facilities, including a library. In a third model, local communities provide and pay for study centre facilities for what they consider to be their local university, as for example in some of the Fernuniversität study centres in Germany, and in the Universidad Nacional Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Spain, where centres may be located in public buildings, e.g. town halls or commercial premises.

Financing

Most study centres are financed by the distance teaching organisation paying rental to the host institution. However, there are some innovative developments. For example, a policy, approved by UNED in 1990, introduced a new form of financing the 53 study centres, whereby 50 per cent of the student enrolment fees are reinvested in the study centre. These study centres are promoted by local and regional, public and private institutions such as town halls and local councils (Tejero and Moreno, 1994). Yet again some study centres may be funded directly by national governments.

Collaboration between distance teaching institutions

The joint use of study centres by distance teaching organisations is surprisingly not as widespread as might have been thought. The South African Institute for Distance Education has been promoting the idea of Community Learning Centres as a way in which distance teaching organisations can share premises for study centres in local community centres which are run by local people involved in the organisation and in policy-making related to such a centre. In this way, the massive distance education systems such as the University of

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South Africa and Technikon SA could share the costs of providing an infrastructure for local support and become more involved in the local community.

EuroStudyCentres

In Europe the EuroStudyCentre network has led the way, with the idea that students from all the European distance education institutions can use the same centres across Europe and can access European and worldwide communications.

The aims and objectives of a transnational network of EuroStudyCentres have been set out by Pronk (1994). The shortened and slightly modified version which follows gives an idea of Pronk's proposed functions which are clearly much wider than simply providing learner support:

- quality assurance/improvement, e.g. via
 - adapting and improving the methodology and practice of student support by evaluating ESCs' experience
 - improving of the planning of course production and the composition of study packs *in relation to local and regional need*
- spreading information about open and distance learning facilities *into regions of Europe where it is not already well known*
- catalysing the transnational delivery of courses by members of the European Distance Teaching Universities Association (EADTU), by application of the new technologies
- enhancing access of EADTU's member institutions to different provinces of the European market
- creating multilingual and multicultural service and learning centres.

Lopez (1993), in a visionary address to the European Open University Network conference on 'course delivery, student support and study centres' in Madrid, was able to expand on these aims when he suggested that the EuroStudyCentres should have specialist senior staff who know everything related to study programmes, courses, grants, exchanges etc. available in the European Community, as well as teaching staff trained for tutoring transnational courses and ready to participate in research projects of an international scope. He went on to emphasise that, although ESCs will develop telematic features to provide students with access to resources, both human and

material, the role of the teacher/tutor will still be fundamental in this kind of study centre. The introduction of telematic systems can heighten the importance of the teacher/tutor, who, besides being an expert on content, must also be a dynamic force in the new teaching-learning relationships created by technology.

Centres for individual study

Although many students visit study centres for particular purposes, e.g. to meet other students, to take part in tutorials and self-help groups or for individual guidance and counselling, a significant number use the study centre as a place where they can go to study quietly and undisturbed, if they cannot do this because of home and social conditions. In many countries, too, lack of electric light and space at home is the normal situation for many students, and in some cases even study centres may not have a reliable source of electricity. In contrast, many richer countries, especially in urban areas, can make such a provision through national library services, but the fact remains that some students, working during the week, may need quiet and accessible facilities to study outside their own home at weekends or in the evenings when public facilities are closed. Such a requirement may be especially important for many women who need to get away from the pressures of domestic life.

But does any institution make such provision? It seems the only way such facilities could be provided would be by co-operation between local and distance educational institutions making a real effort to provide pleasant, safe and healthy facilities for all. It is simply wasteful to have institutional facilities with very limited opening hours. In the UK, despite the increasing use of buildings for part-time 'evening' students, there is still a huge waste of education plant and resources because of the inability by institutions to think creatively about the joint use of premises during evenings and weekends, an increasing emphasis on competition, and because of the lack of national and local leadership on educational issues.

The rise and fall of the traditional study centre in the OU UK

Most study centres are not used for 'study' in the sense of an individual working with his or her learning materials. Certainly in the OU UK, the study centre, which, for the most part, comprises rented rooms in another institution,

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typically a College of Further Education (increasingly on a charge-by-hour basis) began life as a 'Listening and Viewing Centre' with the express purpose of providing access to VHF radio and BBC2 in the days before large numbers of people had such access in their homes. These study centres also provided replay devices to play audio tapes and cassetted film (a precursor of videotape) for those students who had missed programmes which were broadcast nationally by the BBC. Counselling and tutorial sessions were also arranged. At this time, in 1970/71, such was the prestige of the new Open University and its partnership with the BBC that many colleges and Local Education Authorities went out of their way to invite the University to use their premises, charging what was little more than a peppercorn rental for overall usage. In this way, the colleges became linked to the OU and were proud to be study centres. This had enormous positive benefits for the development of collaborative work, for example, in preparatory courses organised by the colleges. Alas, the impact of financial rather than educational success, of competition rather than collaboration, emphasised by the successive Conservative governments since 1979 through their policies to put education on a more business-like footing, has all but destroyed the synergy which was really productive in the early 1970s.

As more and more students gained access to VHF radio, BBC2, and audio and video cassette recorders, the use of the study centre as a listening and viewing centre diminished, and what remained was the access to a computer terminal and to tuition and counselling. But something was lost; there was much to be said for the group viewing of television programmes, especially in the first year of study, and the OU produced a very useful guide to *Learning from Television* (1981), aimed at helping students to use television more effectively. This trend was reinforced some years later when the demand for computer terminals in study centres dropped, as personal computers replaced terminal access to the University's mainframe. A combination of lack of security and increased student ownership or access through their work or friends to PCs led to the University's decision not to locate its own PCs in study centres and to study centre sessions around the computer becoming redundant. The next major step in the use of computing by OU students was the decision by the University, in 1987, to require all its Technology Foundation Course students to rent or purchase a PC (Amstrad 1512 or better) in order to study the course.

Today, most OU UK study centres are simply rented rooms where face-to-face tuition and some individual and group counselling takes place in ordinary classrooms, with little provision for private study outside the rather limited opening hours of the host institution's library, and without any regular access to equipment for computer work, watching television or videos, or listening to audio tapes. Nevertheless, many OU UK students find the group face-to-face

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tuition and counselling which takes place in study centres an enormously valuable support in their studies, and attendance at these sessions is high in the early years. There is, however, no direct evidence to suggest that attendance at study centre tutorials improves learner performance as measured by assignment and/or examination grades. Indeed such evidence would be extremely difficult to assemble and therefore many institutions rely on the views expressed by students. There are, of course, real problems with renting accommodation in other institutions' premises, not least conflicts of interest when there is competition for students and the lack of a corporate identity for the distance education organisation in the local centre, together with lack of control on issues such as safety, cleanliness, opening hours and staff management. Everyone involved in teaching on other institutions' premises has stories about school keepers and caretakers jangling their keys at the most interesting moment in a tutorial! Service level agreements are being developed between the OU and the institutions which host its study centres in an attempt to be clear about responsibilities and expectations, but it has to be said that many facilities provided by other educational institutions are often of a poor quality; as an indicator they are not usually acceptable to the Open University Business School students who use (and pay for) what they consider to be better facilities elsewhere, for example hotel business suites. Interestingly, although there is no proven direct relationship between attendance at study centre tutorials and learner performance (a multiplicity of factors being involved), both attendance and retention rates for Business School students in the OU UK are higher than on other courses. However, as the OU UK moves towards a more modular structure, students are going to expect parity of treatment and facilities across all Open University provision. This raises the huge question of whether the OU should be looking to move its study centres to conference and business centres, to hotels and company training centres. Apart from trebling the cost of provision (and this would have to be recouped from student fees), such a move may have a significant effect on access (off-putting environments for some students and inaccessibility by public transport) and on the synergy between the OU and its host institutions. Interestingly, it may be that most of the complaints about study centres come from the staff who teach in them rather than the students, and this possibility is borne out to some extent by the relatively positive views about study centres expressed by OU UK students.

Student views

A recent report (Fung *et al.*, 1994) provided data from a sample of over 900 undergraduate students, summarised in Table 6.1.