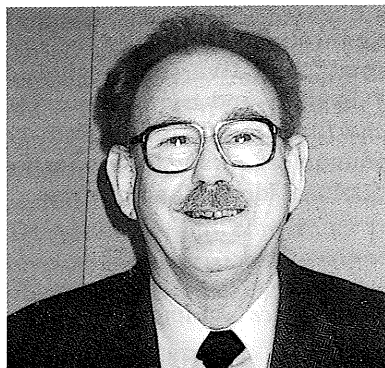


Ormond Tate Reflects



In June 1994, Ormond Tate retired as Director of the Correspondence School after 15 years in the job. DEANZ President, Andrea McIlroy, interviewed him in November 1994 about his career and his thoughts on distance education and DEANZ.

AM Tell me about your career before you came to the Correspondence School.

OT I started teaching as a primary teacher but after finishing my degree part-time I got a job at Penrose High School teaching mathematics and science. Then I did country service at Murapara at Rangatahi College which was fascinating – it was my first time in a school that had a high percentage of Māori students and also where we were so short of staff that you had to teach anything and everything. I ended up teaching 6th form English, school music and technical drawing as well as mathematics and science. In my second year there I became First Assistant. Then I went back to Penrose High School where I ended up in a senior position. From there I went to the Department of Education as Curriculum officer, mathematics. That was in 1969.

AM That was quite a big change.

OT Yes, but I enjoyed it. I was in very close contact with teachers and what was happening and liked helping them and introducing them to new ideas without going to extremes. Then I became secretary of the Review of Secondary Education. About that time we were also publishing booklets to help schools think about things, innovations in schools, schools working in their communities, schools trying new ways of organising the curriculum.

AM It's interesting you mention schools working with communities because we tend to think of that as a fairly recent idea.

OT Well, the report we put out for the committee on secondary education in 1975, the McCombs Report, was a move towards partnership.

AM How was that supposed to work?

OT There wasn't a formal mechanism but what we tried to do was to emphasise that schools should consult their communities about their objectives, they should encourage dialogue, they should encourage parents to have an input and they should try to involve parents in the activities of the school.

AM So would that be through parent teacher groups and such?

OT Yes, the board and meetings. A lot of schools at that time were doing things like 'meet the teacher evenings' about reports and other things which they still do. But we were trying to encourage them to go a

little further, find out what it was their parents expected of the school.

AM That would have been a new emphasis in 1975?

OT It was. When I finished doing that we started on an Intermediate School Review. Then I went back to the Curriculum Development Unit in 1978 as Assistance Director and at that time I was starting to feel that I had been in the department long enough. It was about ten years and I was getting a bit twitchy.

AM I understand that when you were at the curriculum unit you used to draw cartoons to paper your walls.

OT Yes, actually I trained as an art specialist at teachers' college. There was a lot happening in those days when I was at the curriculum unit and I used to draw cartoons about it. I haven't done a great deal of drawing since then because I've been too busy.

AM So what did you do next?

OT Wanda, my wife was working at the Correspondence School and the Principal's job came up. She said 'you might be interested in this - you like organising things and the school needs organising'. So I applied for the job of Principal and went along to the interview which was very daunting because there were about twelve people interviewing me. I didn't know much about distance education. But when I went to the Curriculum Development Unit, I didn't actually know a great deal about curriculum development. However, I got the job and started at the beginning of 1979.

AM What appealed to you about the Correspondence School?

OT One of the things that I soon realised was that it was very closely related to curriculum development. You had to think

very clearly about what the purpose of the activity was, get your objectives clear, then what you were going to teach, how you were going to assess it. It was a systematic thing. I'd done a lot of organisation work when I was in schools. So I could see that the Correspondence School would be an interesting challenge.

AM You must have seen some changes and developments in the Correspondence School over 15 years. What were some of the early challenges you faced?

OT There were three really: consolidation on one site, rationalisation of the administration system and the establishment of indicators about how we were operating.

When I went to the Correspondence School it was located in 12 old houses and wooden buildings around Wellington. We moved into the new building at the end of the first term in 1979 and were more or less consolidated on the one site. But the Department of Education which controlled the Correspondence School had progressively cut down the plans for the new building. They would not believe the staff numbers that Hector McVeigh, the previous Principal, had told them. They were convinced we could fit into the new building and they got very annoyed when we couldn't and we wanted to keep some of the old houses. They threatened to evict us from them. So I said, 'That's fine. You evict us from these old houses and I'll have the staff at their desks on the footpath and I'll ring up the newspapers and tell them to come along and take photographs.' They stopped threatening to evict us then. They wanted the houses, I think, to be done up for ministerial residences.

AM They would all be in key parts of Wellington, in the Thorndon area.

OT Well, most of the ones we kept were in Thorndon because that was closest. But up

until then we had places all over Wellington. Then having got people together we had to develop central, integrated administration and operations systems and get rid of all the duplications.

The Department of Education didn't make it easy. We had been promised some administrative staff to operate the central despatch, but they had just disappeared into the department. So when we came to the new building we had a big despatch area, but nobody to work it. We had to roster teachers to come down and work there, but then the PEP scheme came in and we were able to get ten temporary workers. But we eventually went on to rolling strikes until the Ministry established those positions. It was very hard to get non teaching positions established then because they had to be done through the State Services Commission.

AM So how many sites is the School on now?

OT It's on three. There are integrated telephone and computer systems and a van that goes around on regular trips.

AM And how did you establish indicators to show how you were operating?

OT Some of the staff were working under appalling conditions in those old houses. I remember going up the stairs in one and at the top of the stairs there was a bathroom. There was a desk next to the bath and there was a teacher marking work at it. In other parts of the bathroom there were piles of papers and things and it was very difficult. There were quantities of marking waiting to be done. Some assignments had been in the school for over two months. Well, I felt we needed some monitoring system to make sure that didn't happen and so that we could respond to problems of different people. So we introduced weekly returns and they gave us an idea of how the student work was moving through the school and also what

the work load was for staff in the various departments.

AM Did you find it difficult to establish that kind of monitoring system?

OT No, we were able to establish the idea that you should try to get the work through the school within a week. Correspondence School staff have always felt a strong commitment to their students. They used to make jokes about the fact that they had heavy workloads. But they were concerned about the fact that work was taking a while to go through and one of the reasons was that we didn't have room to put in any more staff. At that time we had roll-generated staff and so as the roll increased we got more staff.

AM But nowhere to put them?

OT Right. But when we came to the new building we were able to increase the teaching staff and then we got some administrative staff as well. So we were able to ensure that people didn't have too heavy workloads. But that advantage disappeared over the later years when the government held our budget.

AM What impressed you about the Correspondence School as a provider of distance education?

OT The concern of the teachers to develop individual programmes that suited students. Because we were dealing with compulsory school age children it was the teacher's responsibility to teach students so that they could learn. The degree of student support given was also impressive – friendly letters, the positive attitude, the tape recordings that were sent, the home visits, the school days and camps. It is unique in the world still as far as I'm concerned and it's much better now than it was then. When I started to learn something about distance education I realised that the Correspondence School

had developed a system which was very similar to Holmberg's theory of distance education as guided didactic conversation. We don't send a whole term's work or a whole year's work, we send six weeks' work, and when the students send their first assignment back, it's marked and the next one is sent out. It's adapted or added to according to the performance, and so there is a whole series of interactions. Students and parents ring up and talk to the teacher, so there is a lot of rapport established between teachers, parents, and students, and from what I read about student support when I was learning about distance education it seemed that we were doing a very good job already. Those things were all set as part of the philosophy and the tradition of the school.

AM That well developed personal relationship between the teacher and the pupil and the interaction that goes with it is one of the real strengths of the Correspondence School. Some models of distance education are much more industrialised.

OT I was just coming to that because what was really missing at the Correspondence School was this industrialised model. We had to do something about rationalising our course development procedures and establish a systematic quality assurance process. While some of the lessons were very good, I felt there was a lack of system about assuring the quality of them. We needed a good recipe to make sure that our work was very good, and so we established our distance teaching advisors system. We looked very closely at what the universities and others were doing in terms of course production and we developed a controlled course production and development system.

AM And along with that did you get better economies of scale than you had before?

OT Well, what we did was to ensure the finished product was of a better quality.

Economies of scale came when we started looking at the costs of things – that was another thing that I was concerned about. In 1990 and 1991 we had our budget cut by 15 percent and we were able to establish a system whereby we could cost everything in the school fairly easily and fairly quickly.

AM What would you say were the highlights of your time at the Correspondence School?

OT Dealing with the parents and the students. They are so appreciative of the Correspondence School. I made a policy every year of going into as many school camps as I possibly could to spend at least a day at each one and talk to all the parents and students.

AM And also seeing how the material works?

OT Yes, Another advantage of the system in the Correspondence School is that 11 regional representatives – visit students in their homes. They send a report to the school and they talk on the telephone to the teachers so they have a very good idea of students' circumstances and how they are getting on.

AM Would you say that the kind of teacher that likes to work in the Correspondence School has any particular qualities? Are they different from any teacher that prefers to stay in the face-to-face classroom situation?

OT Well, the Correspondence School had an unfortunate name for being a refuge for people that couldn't manage in the classroom and that was because, before my time, the Department of Education used to draft people into the Correspondence School - people who were not able to get other jobs. To succeed here teachers have to be very good. They have to be very clear about what they are trying to teach, how they are going to teach it and what the students are going to do. They also have

to be able to establish rapport with students because the power that teachers have over students in a lecture or classroom doesn't exist. They have to win their respect and help them to feel positive about their work. They have to be sympathetic about the things that are not well done and try to suggest ways in which they can be improved, and at the same time gently kick them in the backside without upsetting them if they are not doing what they ought to be doing. I think that requires a teacher with some perception and sensitivity. They are often also working with another person in the family – the parent or the supervisor. So teachers have got to be intelligent, sensitive people. As I said, the Correspondence School had a reputation for being a place for the infirm, the lame, and the blind. The strange thing was that when I went to the Correspondence School in 1979, I had only been here two months when I developed severe arthritis and I was very concerned when I thought that I was going to be using a stick forever. Well I got over that and then two years later I started to go blind with cataracts and I thought there really must be something in the atmosphere.

I greatly enjoyed my time there. I enjoyed the staff that I worked with I enjoyed meeting the parents and the students, and I enjoyed the contacts with other distance educators both in New Zealand, and overseas. I must have visited at least 50 or so distance education institutions in at least 15 or 16 different countries and they are all different. I didn't see any two that were the same but all have concerns are very similar.

AM What are they?

OT Well, concern with developing good course materials, the interaction of the students, student support, and cost economies. And there are so many different systems. As far as I can see distance education can be developed in a multitude of ways to meet the education

needs that are perceived as important, and the cultural, social, and economic circumstances of the people at the time. What amazes me now is the way distance education is being used to fill the gaps in and support formal face-to-face education. So you get a mixture of distance education and face-to-face education and I think that's going to happen more and more, particularly with the development of technology.

AM That's certainly what's happening in New Zealand now.

OT Well, it makes really good sense especially with the technology packages that are available ; you can now communicate easily with your students, you can send out really good course materials. I don't quite know what's going to happen in terms of the internationalisation of course materials. I don't think it's going to be as big as some people think it is, because I don't think it's in the nature of people to accept a course say from Canada or the United States or England and teach it in New Zealand. However, distance education techniques and technology provide the opportunity of using world experts in courses around the globe. I think we've got the opportunity of riding on the back of the technological wave that is coming.

I think one thing that is going to happen in distance education is a change of staff roles. At present the majority of staff at the Correspondence School and the Open Polytechnic and, I suppose, at Massey too, mark student work. Now I don't think that marking students' work is all that valuable. I think the work should go into preparing very good interactive learning packages, so that the students get immediate feedback about how they are getting on, rather than having to wait for their work to be marked. I think that it is becoming more and more possible to use computers in this way. As interactive instructional technology is developed,

then the importance of marking decreases, but at the moment in our situation anyway marking is the only way that the teacher and the student interact so it's very important.

I think we should also put more time into what I would call student support, that is, helping students, explaining things to students, encouraging students, helping them access resources, finding out why they are having difficulty with things. I suppose it's a form of oral marking but it's more personal and I think it's more positive and more helpful and it's very necessary in distance education. It's a crazy idea that the student does an assignment, sends it to the institution, it takes up to a week to get there and then it takes one or two weeks to get it through the institution, and they get it back a month later. By that time they have done their next assignment, and it's not all that relevant. It would be much better if, when the tutor got the assignment, he or she rang the student up and said something about it straight away. Or better still, if while the students are doing the assignment the teacher interacts with them.

AM Of course we can do that now, it's just that it is very difficult in a system where there is one course controller and 300 students trying to operate at that level.

OT And that's the problem with email. I think email is going to expand enormously in distance education, but it does take tutor time to respond. It's good for student support and for personalising the content of things.

AM What other challenges do you see for distance education?

OT Well, I think the quality of courses material is going to improve. I think it is quite good now but the requirements of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority must result in improvements. But we need to be cautious in developing expensive computer assisted learning materials.

There has got to be quality. It is no good wasting all that time and money on rubbish, and when you look at a lot of commercially produced computer assisted learning, it's very shiny and glossy but the education is dreadful. We have got to make sure that sort of thing doesn't happen and I think the quality of courses will improve, and if it does, they will be sought after by the face-to-face institutions. I think the main problem with face-to-face institutions is the investment in capital works, such as buildings. They are designed to be used in a certain way. We need to learn to use those facilities in different ways. I think education occurs in the person, not in the classroom.

AM You have been a very influential person in distance education in New Zealand, Ormond, and a very important person in the development of DEANZ. You were the first President of DEANZ and the only person to hold that position for two terms. You have also been on the DEANZ Executive since its inception. How important has DEANZ been to distance education in New Zealand?

OT I think DEANZ has been very important indeed. It has helped people in distance education in New Zealand to realise distance education didn't just exist within their own institutions, it was national and it was worldwide. I think it has enabled the institutions in New Zealand to support one another and to increase knowledge and experience of staff a great deal. However, I feel it has got many tasks still to do. I was very interested in the latest DEANZ questionnaire which picked up on the business about training people in distance education. I feel that is a job DEANZ has got to do because nobody else is going to. I don't know how many people at Massey are involved in distance education, but at the Correspondence School there are about 500 staff and there are about 300 at Open Polytech and so there's a big group of people working in distance education. There should be some

way that they can be trained other than by their institution.

AM Before DEANZ was established, did you have much contact with people from the other distance education providers or has DEANZ really been the vehicle through which this has happened?

OT There wasn't much contact. The Principal of TCI [Technical Correspondence Institute] and the Director of CUES [Centre for University Extramural Studies, Massey University] and I met on an informal basis a couple of times a year. However, I still don't think there is as much cooperation as there needs to be. There could be cooperation in terms of staff training, in terms of research, but it will be very hard to get this until DEANZ is in the position to have somebody working for them on a paid basis.

AM What sort of role do you think such a person should have?

OT I am thinking of somebody whose job it would be to promote cooperative activities among institutions, and to establish the business of training. That will take quite a lot of doing because it would need to be approved by the Qualifications Authority. I think somebody could also go round and find out what institutions are interested in terms of research and try to see if there could be cooperative research. There is also the business of relating to the other institutions that are starting using distance education. DEANZ should be doing something about visiting them.

AM Drawing them into our networks?

OT That's right. DEANZ also needs to be much more political. In the last election both National and Labour had a little bit about distance education in their education policies for the first time ever. But this government has not involved anybody from distance education on any committees or advisory groups. Apart

from Shona Butterfield on the employment taskforce, they haven't got anybody giving them advice on distance education. This is one of the functions of DEANZ - talking to the Ministry, talking to the Minister. There should be somebody who gets the responses together and comes out and makes a statement of behalf of DEANZ. At present the individual heads of institutions do it or nobody does it. I think that DEANZ will never fulfil its promise until it has someone doing this.

AM So you are really talking about another step in the professionalisation of the Association.

OT Yes, probably a half-time position or something like that.

AM That's a very interesting thought.

OT It is also very important that DEANZ develops its international networks. We should build on the links we have and make sure that our conferences appeal to people from Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the South Pacific, and so on.

AM Those are very good challenges that you have thrown out to DEANZ.

OT It is very hard to do, but I think they are a set of issues that DEANZ has to confront.

It depends a lot on the ability of the institutions to support DEANZ. I was very interested to find that when I was talking to Reidar Roll, the Secretary General of ICDE, they are going to make it a condition of election to their executive that they have a written statement from the president or the CEO of the institution the person belongs to, that institution will carry all the costs involved in that person's work for ICDE. I think that sort of thing has to be done. I know it means that you will only get executive members from bigger institutions, but how else is DEANZ going to get the money and support that it needs?

- AM** But the small providers tend not to be represented and that's a real loss. The big institutions tend to take over organisations like DEANZ.
- OT** Well its hard to see how DEANZ is going to exist otherwise.
- AM** It's an issue with which we constantly grapple.
- OT** Besides DEANZ is a lot of work and there is a lot more work that could be done. For example, DEANZ might look at the business of quality assurance. Maybe DEANZ should be a body that gives registration or certification for meeting quality standards.
- AM** That's an interesting idea, Ormond.
- OT** And DEANZ could charge a fee for that, they could charge several thousand dollars to come in and audit an institution to see whether the institution has got quality assurance procedures in place and documented.
- AM** You are talking about really big changes in the nature and scope of DEANZ here.
- OT** Another way I think DEANZ could get money would be to say to itself, 'Who is it that makes money from distance education in New Zealand?' In our case it's the Government Printer, New Zealand Post, Telecom. Now we should be involved with these people and planning how they can be part of our association. And we should be getting sponsoring.
- AM** Yes, we don't take advantage of it do we? What do you think of the *Journal of Distance Learning* in terms of a DEANZ development?
- OT** I am a little afraid it will become an academic publication rather than having a practical orientation.
- AM** I think we're very aware of that and we are trying very hard not to make it an academic publication but to have a balance between theory and practice. It's very important we keep the Correspondence School and all DEANZ sector groups very much involved in the *Journal*.
- OT** I think one of the things New Zealand distance education hasn't done is to describe itself to the world. People don't realise the strength of distance education in New Zealand or the quality of it. It has got a long history and there are a lot of people who are very expert in distance education here. The standards are good, there is no doubt at all about it. We have a lot of experience and expertise in distance education. We are not only good at the teaching, we are also good at the administration and the management of distance education. Also we are very economical. The *Journal* will help us describe ourselves to the world.
- AM** What are you going to do in your retirement? I know you have already done a consultancy or two.
- OT** I don't really know if I want to do consultancy. I just got pitch-forked into these ones. I might do some more. My wife and I are just coming to terms with getting up in the morning. I like to watch sport on the TV and Wanda likes to garden. I haven't come to terms with extra time yet.
- AM** Thank you for your time. I hope you will continue your association with DEANZ and that you and Wanda will have a long and happy retirement.