



The Long Journey of Distance Learning From Fringe to Mainstream

Alison Fields, Infosolutions
Simon Paul Atkinson, Sijen.com

Abstract

Following the widespread adoption of distance and flexible learning techniques during the COVID-19 pandemic, some aspects of open, flexible, and distance learning were incorporated into mainstream teaching. This brings the long history of distance learning from the fringe into the daylight of modern mainstream education. In acknowledgement of this change, this special issue of the journal looks back at the history and development of distance learning from the pages of the journal. Also included, for the first time, is a history of distance learning in New Zealand entwined with its professional association—the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ), formerly the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ). Seven reprinted articles covering aspects of the history of distance learning complete the issue.

Keywords: distance learning; online learning; history; Aotearoa New Zealand; DEANZ; FLANZ

Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* looks at the history of distance learning in its various forms. It places particular emphasis on the history of New Zealand and the New Zealand professional association for this area, originally known as DEANZ (Distance Education Association of New Zealand) and later as FLANZ (Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand). The *Journal of Distance Learning* originated from this Association in 1995. The name was changed to the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* in 2011, and the publication continues to serve as the flagship journal of the association.

The history of distance learning recorded in the *Journal of Distance Learning* and the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*

In past decades, distance learning was predominantly a way to provide education for those who were unable to access mainstream contact classes at all levels of education. Its main users were those who were geographically distant, housebound, or unable to attend educational institutions for health, work, or other reasons. Physical attendance at schools and learning institutions was the main method of education and distance learning was on the fringe. Over time, distance learning methods have become more established and advances in technology have enabled new

distance learning and communication options such as telephone, videotapes and video links, streaming services, and online classrooms, to be not only used as an alternative to mainstream contact classes, but also to enhance traditional face-to-face learning.

When the COVID-19 pandemic led to a near-global lockdown in 2020, distance learning came to the fore as the method readily available to connect with students to continue their learning (Fields, 2020). Distance education moved from the fringe to the mainstream. Online and other distance learning methods were widely used and experienced, and have now become part of the range of possible delivery methods recognised by educators worldwide.

This issue of the Journal looks back at the journey of distance learning as recorded in issues from the beginning of the *Journal of Distance Learning* (1995 to 2010) and the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (since 2011). In recognition of the now common experience of distance and online learning by educators around the world, it is an appropriate time to pause and look back at the history and journey of open, flexible, and distance learning in this journal.

The Journal is based in New Zealand but has international content and readership, and the history in this issue reflects both of these. It is now a truly international journal—accepting, publishing and promoting articles and other content globally.

As the flagship journal of the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand, the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* reflects the history of the professional association that supports it—the Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ) as it was from 1984 to 2016, and the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ) as it has been since 2016. The ethos of the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand is “Making ako accessible for all”. (“Ako” is the Māori kupu/word for both teaching and learning and the reciprocal relationship between the two.) Making ako accessible for everyone is the purpose and value of flexible learning, and to this end the Journal is fully open access (there are no charges for authors or readers) to make its “ako accessible for all”.

To celebrate the history of distance learning in New Zealand, the invited article in this issue is a history of distance learning, and of both DEANZ and FLANZ. Andrew Higgins has written this history over an extended period, building on his long-standing interest and contribution to this professional association. The first two instalments of the history were published in the DEANZ/FLANZ magazine which ran under several titles from 2009–2019. The third instalment is new and brings the history of the Association up to the present time.

The other content in this issue is reprinted articles from the Journal. They deal with the history of distance learning in all its forms and the history of DEANZ and FLANZ, which have provided good service as professional associations to educators in New Zealand. As a set, these articles provide insight into milestones and strategic developments in both traditional distance learning and the new flexible learning, as well as key points in the history of distance learning in New Zealand in particular.

Papers in this issue

This issue contains the invited article on the history of DEANZ and FLANZ by Higgins. It is followed by the seven articles described below.

Two articles by Bewley begin this set. The first, “Distance Education in New Zealand: An Historical Sketch” (1996), is a thorough early history of distance learning in New Zealand, and was published in one of the very first issues of this journal. As an article of its time, it provides a good deal of detail which is not easily traceable today. It also indicates the importance of distance education at the time. The second article, “An Historical Overview of Flexible Learning

in New Zealand From 1990 to the Present” (2004), was published 8 years later, and covered the remaining history to that time. It focuses on progress and underlying concepts in flexible learning, and the rapidly evolving flexible learning environment, particularly in post-secondary institutions.

In “Winds of Change and Paradigm Shifts: Correspondence, Distance and Open Learning” (1998), Higgins also looks at changes and developments in distance learning in the 1990s. Drawing on Australian, New Zealand, and international practices, he considers the origins and effects of changes to correspondence education and how these changes were influenced by flexible learning practices. He provides insights into the practices of the time—particularly in Queensland and New Zealand—and the theory and progress of flexible learning delivery more widely.

Anderson and Simpson’s article “History and Heritage in Open, Flexible and Distance Learning” (2012) considers how “enduring touchstones” in educational practice that had preceded the authors shaped their own education practice. They identify generations of educational technology through time, how those technologies were used, and the pedagogy that accompanied them. Following this outline, Anderson and Simpson look ahead to possibilities and challenges and how these may be shaped. Aspects covered include social justice and equity, technology use and mediation, interaction, teamwork, process, scholarship, and a focus on people. Readers encountering this article now, over a decade later, may consider the current state of open, flexible, and distance learning and their own practice in the context of the history and heritage now available.

Campbell, writing in the early 2000s, looks back at “The Vintage Years of Elearning in New Zealand Schools”. She provides a clear outline of the development of e-learning within the school sector, from when computers first arrived in schools with electronic mail capability, before the advent of a graphical web internet interface. Tracing this particular history from the mid-1980s, Campbell looks at key developments over a 20-year span, from the establishment of the New Zealand Department of Education’s Computers in Education Development Unit through to the age of the internet and its use in schools. This article ends with a prophetic look at the next 20 years, bringing the possible timeline up to the current day.

Marshall’s “E-learning and Higher Education: Understanding and Supporting Organisational Change in New Zealand” (2012) captures a moment in the history of e-learning in New Zealand with a look at a selection of educational institutions that were benchmarked with the E-Learning Maturity Model (eMM). This model was a response to the New Zealand Government’s Digital Strategy which was launched in 2008. eMM was used to measure the advancements made in these institutions, and results are reported. Five factors were identified as significant influences on the organisations’ ability to change and mature in e-learning.

The final paper included in this special issue on distance learning’s long journey from fringe to mainstream, is Davis and Higgins’ “Researching Possible Futures to Guide Leaders Towards More Effective Tertiary Education”. This article was first published nearly 10 years ago in 2015, so falls within the context of contemporary history. It provides a clear historical marker because it is based on the developments in education as it was in 2015, and looked into the near future (5 years ahead) to imagine what tertiary education would look like using scenario planning and open educational practices. Now that these 5 years are well past, readers are in a good position to assess what has actually taken place, and can use this insight to imagine and plan ahead for the next 5 years. This paper brings the special issue to a natural close, while still leaving the door open for these histories to inform our future.

References

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Biographical notes

Alison Fields

alison@infosolutions.co.nz

Alison is an information scientist and Director of Research at InfoSolutions. She conducts research in information sciences and health information, and contracts in the education sector. She is a fellow of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) and has a Doctorate in Education. Her research areas encompass elearning, online learner support, health information, library services, and continuing professional development. Alison is also joint Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

Simon Paul Atkinson

spa@sijen.com

Simon is a higher education strategist with over 25 years' experience as an academic developer, educational technologist, teacher, and researcher. He has held senior leadership roles in both the United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand and has lectured and presented in over 15 countries, as well as online to global audiences. He has a Doctorate in Museum Studies (Adult Education) and is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is also joint Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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