

# Responses to Greville Rumble's article 'The competitive vulnerability of distance teaching universities'.

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**Greville Rumble's article was published in Vol. 7, No. 2 June 1992 of "Open Learning". In it he argued that distance teaching universities (DTUS) were vulnerable to competition from the campus based universities (CBUS) which were adopting distance education as one of their modes of delivery, and becoming dual mode universities (DMUs). Responses are published here from leading figures in Australia and Canada.**

Rumble's paper should bring satisfaction rather than anxiety to distance teaching eulogists. Overriding the concern that the campus based universities (CBUS) may push the distance teaching universities (DTUS) out of their place in the sun, is the tacit admission that the DTUs had it right all the time. The CBUS, having failed to have the DTUs declared *institute non grata* on the grounds that they propagated a second rate mode of teaching, now wish to put them out of business through legitimate competition. They argued distance teaching was not good enough, now they want to join with it.

Those educators who have not been blinded by the chalk in their eyes now accept that the most significant step forward in education in this half of the century has been the burgeoning of the distance education mode of teaching, and let it be noted that just as significant in this decade will be the mixing of the distance teaching mode with the face to face mode. The inhabitants of the CBUs who successively ignored the distance teaching mode, rejected it, and denigrated it, now have discovered it and embraced it with the fervour of which only the born again are capable. Even the most churlish of the distance educators would have to admit that they have no right to deny their mode of teaching to the reformed heathen for it is difficult to argue against the proposition that any academic institution must have the right to teach using whatever mode or medium it considers best for its students. However, the campus based universities will discover that if they elect to teach in the distance mode as well as face to face they will first have to overcome the hurdle of producing quality multimedia instructional materials including print based, computer based, audio and video based courseware if their efforts are to be taken seriously. If they are capable of doing this, they will then be equipped to move into the distance teaching arena, and the students will be the winners.

The DTUs for their part have little to complain about in the intrusion of the CBUs into their domain. They have had twenty years or more to develop their infrastructure, refine their materials and establish a student support structure. This cannot be done easily or cheaply. The DTUs should have already done it to quality standard and thus have some years start on the CBUS.

Rumble writes of 'the potential ability for CBUs to turn conventional lectures into *basic* distance teaching materials at very low marginal cost'. One would argue that the cost of turning conventional lectures into *quality* distance teaching materials would be much higher. Thus CBUs should find it most difficult to compete successfully in the distance education market with a product which the formerly monopolist DTUs have been developing over the years. For the CBUs to compete will be so costly and time consuming on their part as to require a significant redistribution of resources. Herein lies the ultimate weapon which the DTUs can use, if they believe it necessary, to repel the advances of these distance education neophytes. It is called *quality*. Distance educators have spoken at endless conferences and written in numerous journals of their pedagogical advances. This is rightly so as it cannot be denied that distance educators have made great pedagogical progress and have finally enthused (or shamed) the chalk and talkers into moving toward enlightenment also. But now the distance educators, if they are stirred by the Rumbleian exhortation, must move to repel the attack from the CBUs who have resorted to using the very weapons developed by the DTUS. But surely with the lead which the DTUs have, there should not be much to worry about. Their infrastructure, their instructional expertise and their student support structures should be so well advanced that it will take an enormous redirection of resources by the CBUs to challenge them. The DTUs should have the quality advantage and only need to, as Rumble says, 'maintain and improve the quality of their materials in terms of pedagogy, attractiveness, packaging and support networks'.

Rumble mentions developments in Australia, and indeed the scene here parallels the world situation. In this country there are no DTUs but eight federal government designated dual-mode universities (DMUs). Some DMUs are using the combination of distance education instructional materials plus face to face classes to teach on-campus students, thus bringing together the best of both worlds, and indeed this is the way of the future. The more pioneering of the CBUs are now following in the footsteps of the DMUs and are likewise moving to use distance teaching techniques to support and improve their face to face teaching. Having done this, they may see it as not being a huge step to indulge in some off-campus teaching. It is to be hoped that Australian DMUs will not feel threatened by having their cartel broken up. As on the wider world scene, either the CBUs will have to divert a lot of resources to set up the necessary distance teaching infrastructure or they will market a product of inferior quality. If the latter alternative occurs this will be a sad but short term state of affairs, as the market votes with its feet, and the perpetrators lose. If it is the former, such a decision can only be applauded and (ultimately) all students will be the winners.

It matters little as a final consequence whether the CBUs which begin either to flirt with distance teaching, or enter into a serious relationship, adopt average or marginal costing. These are merely justifications, or otherwise, for funding authorities and academic papers. What matters is the actual cost, and the cost to a CBU of setting up a quality distance teaching, or mixed mode teaching programme will be high.

Rumble correctly says that the per capita student cost of distance education is generally . significantly less than off-campus based universities. But distance teaching, like campus based teaching, can be as cheap or as expensive as is wished. Some DTUs in their attempts to become established or to justify their continued existence, found it possible and necessary to teach at a cheaper rate. While in particular situations it can be agreed that this should be the case, it is a mistake to argue this way as a general principle. It is a mistake the DMUs in Australia did not make. They held the line and won the battle for equal funding for on and off campus students. Education may be cheaper in some distance education institutions than in their on-campus counterparts, but that does not prove the case that it should be. Rumble says of the University of Southern Queensland /USQ costs per (teaching a mixed mode) student could be reduced if necessary by up to 50 per cent'. The rejoinder is that the cost of teaching a student totally by conventional on-campus methods could similarly be reduced, and the result in each case would be a loss in quality.

Finally, Rumble's concluding, almost throw away line, that perhaps 'the most effective response for a DTU may well be to turn itself into a DMU' should be taken seriously. It will be easier for a DTU with high quality instructional materials to find tutors and teaching space for face to face support teaching, than for CBUs to find the necessary expertise and infrastructure to develop quality multimedia instructional materials and an off-campus student support structure. Rumble's paper is a timely warning for DTUs but is still somewhat disconcerting. Every educational institution should have the right to teach in whatsoever mode and using whatsoever media it wishes. If CBUs have become so enlightened they wish to teach in the distance mode using a multimedia mix, then let us give thanks. The next step forward will be their use of such instructional materials for on-campus students to replace or supplement face to face classes. All the DTUs have to fear is their inability to maintain a superior quality differential, or to find the additional resources or a partner to likewise become a DMU.

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Three years ago in this journal, Greville Rumble discussed the question of the relationship between open and distance learning and argued that 'educational and training systems all fall somewhere on a continuum that ranges from the purely contiguous to the purely distant-' that 'many of the approaches used distance education...can be used to support classroom teaching;' and that 'as a result the divide between contiguous and distance education has become less obvious.'<sup>1</sup> In a response to this piece, I noted that such comments were unarguable<sup>2</sup> and the developments that have occurred since have only confirmed this view.

The implication of these comments is that institutions that carry out contiguous education (in Rumble's terminology, campus-based universities or CBUS) and those that undertake distance education (in his term, distance teaching universities or DTUS) will also be subjected to this blurring of the boundaries between what have hitherto been regarded as separate, even competitive forms of education. Certainly, this trend away from a higher education scene<sup>3</sup> in which two opposing or at least sharply different systems of education occupy different parts of the field is one which was clear in 1989 and has only become clearer and more marked since. It is partly this phenomenon which produces the vulnerability of DTUs which Rumble discusses. In this situation, he claims, 'DTUs will need to

seek means of protecting their positions and satisfying their users' needs which are realistic within the resources available, imaginative and synergistic.' (p.43)

Rumble also discusses several options for newly vulnerable DTUs in meeting the threat to their existence or at least to their place in the educational market, (p. 41-42) These range from doing nothing, the only option rejected out of hand, through concentrating 'on doing better what is already being done well' to internationalising, setting up campus-based operations (becoming dual mode institutions, DMUS) or collaboration with CBUS. All of these are - with the exception of the option which he rightly rejects - reasonable choices, courses of action which are being pursued by DTUs around the world. In other words, the final four choices of Rumble's five offer ways in which DTUs may continue to provide a useful and effective service and to preserve or even enhance the place which, over the last 20 years or so, they have won on the post-secondary educational scene.

It is perhaps on the first of Rumble's feasible options that one should concentrate. This is the course of working to do better what is already done well. In pursuing this course, some of the major competitive advantages of the DTUs will be brought into play. As Rumble argues, DTUs 'need to maintain and improve the quality of their materials in terms of their pedagogy, attractiveness and packaging' and to compete locally where institutions like the UKOU 'already have a local support network which is acknowledged to be better than that which can be provided by providers of small degree programmes.' (p.41) These comments are, of course, correct for they do summarise some of the advantages DTUs have in meeting the challenges of the future,

One might, however, question the emphasis being put on the use of such advantages for, in arguing that these advantages can be used in continuing the growing competition with CBUS, Rumble could be influenced too much by the situation of his own institution which is now faced with the entry of increasing numbers of players into a game which it has until recently regarded as its own and thus sees the problem as one of competition rather than collaboration. He could equally well contend, of course, that the argument I am about to make is influenced too much by the situation of my own institution which has never seen the problem in that light.

I would argue that the vulnerability which Rumble rightly sees many DTUs as exhibiting and for which - though he does not argue this they may be partly, even largely to blame should best be answered by abandoning the narrow definition of distance education and concentrating on the wider concept of open learning. In not doing this, it almost seems that Rumble has forgotten the argument he made in the article cited earlier about the position of distance education in the spectrum of approaches to education in general and reverted to the idea that DTUs should follow a narrow and rather exclusive definition of their task. This leads him perhaps to miss part of the point of the situation in which DTUs increasingly find themselves and to draw therefore rather mistaken lessons from it.

The point is that the boundaries between what CBUs and DTUs do really are becoming blurred, that the means available to *both types of institution* to serve different and expanded markets are changing and increasing, that this is happening at a time when demand is expanding and resources are shrinking. This may not be the case in every jurisdiction but it certainly is in every one that I am aware of In such a situation, the answer for DTUs is to take advantage of the strengths that they have to answer the needs not merely of students and potential students but also of other institutions with whom they should be collaborating rather than competing. The emphasis which most DTUs have placed on quality - in terms of pedagogy and of support for students - and on flexibility - in terms of responding to changing needs and demands gives them a decided advantage over most CBUs which have, on the whole, been notably unable to break out of the rigidity of the traditional system. In my own jurisdiction, both types of institution increasingly recognise the need for and, what is more important, the possibility of mutual support in meeting the needs of a growing market. This experience may be unusual but it is certainly not unique. The whole point of the exercise becomes collaboration not competition.

The result of such collaboration, proceeding, as it does, from a recognition of the varying strengths of both types of institution, will be a more integrated and effective university system. It may also lead to the increasing abandonment of distinctions between CBUs and DTUs because most institutions will be enabled to 'concentrate on doing better what one is already doing well' though now with the support of others. This is presumably what those who expound the concept of open learning have been trying to achieve.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Rumble, G. (1989) "Open learning', 'distance learning', and the misuse of language', *Open Learning*, Vol.4, No.2, pp.32-40.

<sup>2</sup> Mugridge, I. (1989) 'The language of open and distance learning', *Journal of Distance Education*, IV(2), pp.83-85.

<sup>3</sup> In n.2. Rumble notes that he has throughout used the term university but that college or polytechnic could have been used equally well. My comments are also based on this assumption.