The mega-universities and the knowledge media: implications of new technologies for large distance teaching universities

We describe the development of distance education with reference to its history, the technologies it has used and the pedagogical situations it creates. It is useful to distinguish between the remote-classroom and correspondence traditions of distance education and between synchronous and asynchronous methods. This provides a basis for reviewing the status of the mega-universities, the ten distance teaching universities that enroll over 100,000 students, and the strategic challenges these institutions face.

Although the mega-universities operate at much lower unit costs than conventional universities they face competitive challenges as more institutions adopt distance teaching methods. We analyse the competitive situation of the mega-universities, using a framework developed by Michael Porter, in order to determine where these institutions should focus their efforts to achieve cost leadership and/or desirable differentiation. We then examine how new technologies might help the mega-universities to enhance their competitive advantage in priority areas, notably by improving the cost-effectiveness of teaching and learning. The knowledge media that have grown out of the convergence of computing, telecommunications and the cognitive sciences receive special attention. The study concludes that networking students from their home computers should reinforce the competitive advantage of the mega-universities. Distance education was already evolved through two generations, correspondence courses and multi-media packages. The knowledge media represent a third generation of supported open learning that enriches distance education by giving students rapid communication with the people and learning resources of the academic community.

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