In Search of an Academic Administration and Organizational Model for E-Distance Universities

Insook Lee & Yeonwook Im

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and propose an academic administration and organizational model in order to enhance the educational quality of digital distance universities. This study employed a comprehensive cross analysis of a diverse set of information including literature review, analysis of international distance universities, survey of expert opinions, benchmark analysis of domestic distance education enterprises, and survey of distance universities. The suggested model that evolved shows that distance universities should be equipped with detailed services on both the faculty and staff sides of academic administration, instruction-learning support, student aid, and educational evaluation, and that these services also need support in the form of organization. The model also emphasizes flexibility and dynamism that connects services and organizations and enables timely provision of services and top-level receptiveness.

Introduction
Organized and practical efforts to improve the quality of education are called for immediately with the unparalleled expansion of the educational enterprise in its size, diversification, and services. A part of such efforts is general research on academic administration and organization models that can accommodate diversities in distance education types, services, technologies, and students served. In Korea, nine digital distance universities opened in 2001 under the ‘Lifelong Education Act’ of August 1999 (Korea Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development, 2000). The Korea Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development approved an increase in the entering student enrollment quota to 12,900 in November 2001. In 2005, the total of 17 cyber universities opened with entering student enrollment quotas totaling over 4,000 students.

The purpose of this study was to propose an academic administration and organizational model appropriate for distance universities in order to enhance the educational quality of digital distance universities. The model can be utilized as an alternative solution to the problems that digital distance universities in Korea and other countries have experienced with inappropriate or inadequate academic administration and organizational structures.

Research Methodology
This study employed a comprehensive cross analysis of a diverse set of information in order to enhance the quality of the research product. Each part of the process is explained below.

*Literature Review*

An administrative and organizational framework was derived from a literature review on foreign accreditation criteria for distance universities and academic administration and organization models. The framework was applied to analyses of web sites that distance universities are running, a survey of expert opinions, and a survey of domestic and foreign distance universities.

*Analysis of Web Sites*

Analyses of web sites for current academic administration and organizational structure of domestic and foreign distance universities were performed.

*Survey of Expert Opinions*

Eighteen Korean experts in the areas of instructional technology, information and computer engineering, and educational administration participated in a survey. We utilized a 5-point scale response on the importance of each element of academic administration and organization in distance universities. We also requested four experts to design a detailed academic administration and organization model.
Benchmark Analysis of Domestic Distance Education Enterprises

Two leading distance education companies in Korea were utilized as benchmarks. The benchmarking analysis used the same factors used in the expert survey.

Current Survey of Distance Universities

Using a survey, we gathered information regarding the current situations of nine domestic distance universities that opened in 2001, and six domestic distance universities that opened in March 2002. We also surveyed four distance universities in the United States and Australia using questionnaires, interviews via e-mail, telephone, and on-site, site visit, and web site analyses.

Literature Review

Evaluation and accreditation standards as a quality control mechanism for distance universities have been widely studied in England, America, and Australia where distance universities had an early start. In order to draw practical implications for the quality control of distance education institutions in Korea, we reviewed several representative accreditation bodies such as the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC), Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), National Education Association (NEA), Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT).
The common elements we found in the quality control mechanisms for distance universities are:

1. **Institutional context and commitment**: It is a fundamental principle that a distance university articulates its ideals, educational goals, and methods to its students and the community and that its educational programs conform to them.

2. **Curriculum and instruction**: Educational quality is a decisive factor in distance universities, and it is determined by the fitness of the curriculum that fully embodies sound pedagogical principles. It hinges on the extent to which the instructors with academic expertise accommodate the complex and multifaceted educational demands of the students.

3. **Faculty support**: The role of faculty in distance universities requires diversification and readjustment especially considering, the newness of instructional environment of distance universities in which development of instructional materials and delivery of instruction are often performed by different entities.

4. **Student support**: University students in the 21st century distinguish themselves from traditional students both demographically and spatially, and this requires a new student support system from admission policies such as public relations,
recruitment of students, and entrance procedure to support services sent as the library system.

5. **Evaluation and assessment:** The new technology in education gives rise to a new task of evaluation and measurement of not only academic performance of students, but also the overall curriculum and organizational management system in distance universities. Critical issues such as identifying students participating in instruction and tests, the integral evaluation of learning, and protection of private information associated with accurate evaluation of students' academic achievement need continual innovation. The assessment of the effectiveness of the overall program requires a diverse set of measurements such as attainment of the planned outcomes, enrollment rate of continuing students, student satisfaction levels, and cost-effectiveness.

In the report titled Distributed Education and Its Challenges, the American Council on Education (ACE, 2001) proposed several ideas for successful organizational structure of online distance universities, which can be summarized as follows.

First, distance universities have diverse strategic motives in their founding that should be matched with appropriate institution types. Second, competition and survival of a distance university requires an organizational structure that is significantly different
from that of an off-line university, especially in the areas of dynamism and flexibility.

Third, a key role in institutional management is to decide who has the decision-making authority in each operation. Fourth, an important, yet difficult challenge to distance universities is recruitment of competent and qualified faculty. An even more difficult challenge that requires significant effort is locating and securing necessary faculty support staff. Fifth, demands from students registered in distance learning calls for an extensive review of the library system, counseling on student affairs and job search, financial aid, registration, and other operational aspects of off-line universities. Sixth, the paradigm that an educational institution provides all education services by itself is changing. Distance learning requires a unique combination of technology, entrepreneurship, capital, and market sense. Seventh, many new policies and regulations related to distance learning are needed regarding intellectual property rights, conflicts of interests and responsibilities, workload, accessibility, fair use, and so forth.

Survey of Expert Opinions

All of 18 Korean domestic experts in distance learning agreed that the single most important element in the area of academic administration in distance universities is ‘quality of contents’. The technology base, including the network, software, and hardware, was also identified as an important element. Subcategories of curriculum
management such as curriculum elements including semester system, course requirements, and GPA requirements; quality control of learning including attendance check, evaluation method, and class size; and diploma including authority for diploma conferment and diploma type were also regarded as important elements as reported in the survey. Qualification requirements for faculty also were noted in the listing of important elements.

Interestingly, domestic distance learning experts and the foreign literature on quality assessment of distance universities agree in their emphasis of common elements. The common key elements in the area of academic administration for a successful distance university are (1) quality of contents, (2) technology base for distance learning, (3) curriculum management, and (4) faculty quality standards. Also notable are tuition by credit, reduction of the number of courses allowed per semester or the introduction of a multi-term system, practical and interdisciplinary curricula, and support for enhancement of e-learning capability. As to the organization model, it is pointed out that distance universities should leave behind the framework for traditional off-line universities with the emphasis on securing faculty support staff, education quality control systems, and on redefining and clarifying the roles of faculty and staff.

Benchmark Analysis of Distance Education Enterprises
The analysis of academic administration and the organizational models in the two companies studied had an overall implication that distance universities need academic administration and organization that is ‘flexible’ and capable of taking advantage of the ‘uniqueness of distance universities’. Several specific implications for academic administration of distance universities follow.

First, diversification of the academic term system, credit system, and learning period is feasible and necessary. Resources should be allocated equally for the establishment and operation of four different subsystems: faculty, faculty support staff, curriculum, and student support services. Second, admissions criteria may be diverse according to the distance university’s vision, goals, or organizational strategy and may range from strict criteria to ones that do not have specific requirements.

Third, an appropriate workload for students in internet-based distance learning must be specified and shared within the organization so as to be a factor determining the amount and types of instructional and support material dependent on content is developed. Fourth, types of certification can vary across educational institutions according to their pedagogical vision, objectives, and organizational strategy and can include diploma, certificate of completion, license, and a credit bank system.

Fifth, quality of instruction should be controlled in an organized way through a
diversified evaluation system, for which various ways to diagnose academic
achievement such as log data and process checks are necessary.

Sixth, space management in distance universities should be based on the concept
of workspace for faculty and faculty support staff rather than on the concept of
instruction space.

Seventh, budget and financial requirements of distance universities call for
aggressive marketing strategies. Decisions about tuition levels need to account for the
unique characteristics of distance universities. A variety of tuition policies according to
the situations of distance universities appear to be feasible and necessary.

A few specific implications for organizational aspects of distance universities
are:

1. Distance universities need a new model for human resource management to
secure enough staff in the areas of instructional content development,
course management, marketing, and general management.

2. Strategic outsourcing for some parts of required services may be necessary
and efficient.

3. Securing and managing the technology base, including software, hardware,
and network is an essential prerequisite to proper implantation.
4. Application of organizational elements of e-businesses may be necessary. Also necessary for quality control of educational services are in-house development and organization-wide sharing of models for work responsibility and a business process model, especially for content development.

Analysis of Academic Administration and Organization of Foreign Distance Universities

We analyzed models for academic administration and organization in four distance universities abroad: University of Phoenix Online, Penn State World Campus, University of Maryland University College, and University of Southern Queensland. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is in Australia and the others are in the United States.

The analyses lead to the following conclusions. First, each of the four distance universities we analyzed operates on an organizational platform and within a culture of its own that is appropriate for distance education whether it is an annex institution of an existing university or an independent institution. Distance education should not be viewed as a supplementary function of an existing university. Introducing a new set of departments, equipment, staff, rules and regulations is necessary to raise the level of
efficiency and effectiveness.

Second, the quality of education provided by the online universities is based on their exclusive know-how and technological advantage. The University of Maryland University College has a WebTycho system, and the system and technology of the USQ is based on the intelligent flexible learning model developed in conjunction with the NextEd. Their technological advantage is maintained by continual update and security.

Third, the universities use aggressive efforts to recruit students. For example, USQNet, discounts on payments in whole, lottery events for free courses, and so forth. Their marketing efforts are diversified to target students for both degree programs and non-degree programs such as certificate programs, credit programs, and tailored programs.

Fourth, the universities provide one-stop student support service online that includes academic administration, a digital library, technical support, training for online learning aptitude, and services for special students. For example, the University of Phoenix has ‘Onestop’ student service, a digital library, academic counselor, and 24-hour technical support.

Fifth, development and management of a unique educational instructional support model consistent with the university wide pedagogical objectives and mission,
curriculum, and evaluation system, show including instructional quality control. For example, USQ uses a ‘Unit-Team’ model for standardization of content development and quality control. In a related example, some universities specify a certain amount of study hours appropriate per credit hour as a guideline. The University of Phoenix officially suggests 15-20 hours of work per week for a 3-credit course.

Sixth, quality control in successful distance universities is made possible by support organizations linked to front end organizations. USQ operates committees for marketing, system management, and instructional management. The Distance Education Center at USQ takes the responsibility of supporting online education. The University of Maryland University College uses LeADS (Learning Applications Development and Support) in conjunction with other IT departments as a support center for distance education for quality control.

Seventh, securing necessary resources is crucial for quality control and organized growth in distance universities. The universities reviewed in our analysis use abundant resources and well designed organization to provide a wide range of programs in a variety of disciplines to students all over the world.

Eighth, digital distance universities need programs to help faculty and students develop expertise in online instruction and learning. For example, the Penn State
University World Campus has built an online faculty community to promote faculty development through online training, seminars, and newsletters and opened a free online course called ‘World Campus 101’ for students.

Ninth, digital distance education demonstrates the absolute need for partnership. For example, the University of Phoenix maintains a close partnership with Microsoft Corporation in systems development, and the development of e-book is currently under way. USQ is a shareholder of NextEd, and takes responsibility in its technical support and cooperates with INDELTA for online training.

Tenth, variety is another theme in digital distance education. Distance universities are creating their own unique and differentiated strategies while they share many common characteristics. Distance universities employ their own strategies and policies regarding academic term systems, tuition levels, admissions, student evaluation, curricula, student aid, central administrative organizations, and online support staff. These differences appear to stem from the universities’ founding missions and commitments. For example, the University of Phoenix is a private for-profit corporation. USQ is a non-profit organization on the surface but in effect it is an organization that pursues profits and invests in independent for-profit companies. The Penn State World Campus is a non-profit organization and the University of Maryland UC is a for-profit
organization, while both are affiliated with existing universities (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001).

Analysis of Academic Administration
and Organization of Domestic Distance Universities

We applied the same framework to all of the 15 domestic distance universities currently under operation. The analysis leads to the following conclusions. First, most distance universities follow existing off-line universities in rules regarding academic term systems and credit composition. This practice does not take into account the uniqueness of distance universities running in a cyber environment that are distinct from the existing traditional off-line learning environments, while it may maintain a level of compatibility with off-line universities for purposes such as credit exchange.

Second, work hours needed to finish a session in distance education is more difficult to determine than in face-to-face instruction with a predetermined timeframe.

Third, according to studies so far, development and choice of instructional learning models in most distance universities are left to instructors or faculty members simply follow the models of traditional off-line universities. It is not clear that distance universities have strategies for support and quality control of instructional models that are left to instructors to develop or choose. The distance education models suggested in
a few distance universities are too general or too theoretical to be used directly in
distance education.

Fourth, students in distance universities can interact with the instructor as
needed, but the channels are mostly asynchronous as in emails and electronic b-board.
Asynchronous interactions facilitate certain aspects of opinion exchange but limit
immediate feedback. The class size limit in most distance universities is 100 to 200
students in a class, which limits the access to timely responses from instructors. While
there may be teaching assistants working with an instructor, there are issues that can
only be addressed by the instructor.

Fifth, excellence in the area of expertise is generally the most important criterion
in faculty recruiting of distance universities, as in traditional off-line universities. This
tendency, while not without merits, downplays the importance of knowledge about the
cyber environment in which instruction and academic administration is performed.

Sixth, most distance universities operate support systems for content design,
facility management, computing system management, public relations and marketing,
and teaching assistants. What is most lacking is a support system to help students
manage the learning process. Academic advisors, academic counselors, and distance
education advisors found commonly in foreign distance universities are examples of a
support systems to help students who are on their own in the distance education environment and suffer with difficulties in managing the learning process.

Seventh, most distance universities rely on tuition revenues for their financial needs. Distance universities need diverse sources of financial resources to meet the demand for large investments, especially at the early stages of operation.

Conclusion: Proposal of an Academic Administration and Organizational Model for Digital Distance Universities

A proposal for academic administration and organizational model for digital distance universities is based upon the literature review, survey of expert opinions, benchmark analysis of distance education enterprises, and an analysis of academic administration and organizations for foreign and domestic distance universities.

This model indicates that distance universities need to be equipped with detailed services on both the faculty and staff sides of academic administration, instructional learning support, student aid, and educational evaluation. Further these services need support in the form of organization. The model also emphasizes flexibility and dynamism that connects services and organizations enabling the timely provision of services and top-level receptiveness.

[Insert figure 1 about here]
**Academic Administration**

(1) *Academic term system*. The academic term system can take a variety of forms including the semester system, trimester system, quarter system, and no-term system. The choice needs to align with the educational philosophy and business strategies of universities. Faculty, support staff, curriculum, and student services need to align with the type of term system employed.

(2) *Curriculum management model*. Areas of majors in distance universities should be limited to those appropriate for distance education taking into account a specialization strategy. Cross-recognition of common major courses among related major areas should be expanded.

(3) *Academic organization*. Academic organization consists of the faculty of general education and the faculty of specialty education. The faculty of specialty education comprises college, graduate school, and research centers. All students belong to the university but the environment should allow autonomous student organizations to be formed according to their majors and personal interests. A special task force should be in place to help control the quality of instruction and learning, the central activities in distance universities.

(4) *Tuition and fees*. Tuition should be billed by credit. Revenue sources can be
expanded by charging for various services offered by the university. Tuition level must vary according to the characteristics of educational services offered by each university. In addition, various charges such as technical support fees, course administration fees, and content development fees may be charged at the discretion of each university. Methods and timing for tuition payment may take various forms including installment payments. Tuition payments should precede registration and a cancellation fee should apply.

(5) Admission and registration. Admission requirements, other than the requirement of a high school diploma, should vary across distance universities. In addition, admission procedure and registration should be done online.

(6) Quality control in learning. One instructor and at least one teaching assistant or an equivalent automated learning support system should be assigned to each course. Evaluation and assessment procedures need to be institutionalized that address the closure of courses and academic departments for the reasons of unexpected content or lack of students.

(7) Enrollment size. Decisions about enrollment size can be left to the university on the condition that the university maintains a certain standard as to the quality of students’ academic achievement, instructional content, quality control system for
learning, cyber education system including network, software, and hardware,
curriculum elements including term system, credit composition, and credit standards,
the quality and size of faculty, and marketing capacity.

**Instruction-learning Support**

*(1) Quality control in curriculum.* An essential factor in quality control of
lifelong education is the continual update of curriculum: decisions about curriculum and
course offerings should be guided by the pedagogical mission and objectives of the
educational institution. Curriculum development and assessment should be done
regularly by a specialized department with participation of interested parties such as
faculty, alumni, students, and representatives for business and industry. This needs to be
minimum evaluation standards for curriculum development, design, and the delivery of
distance education.

*(2) Quality control in content.* Quality control in content requires detailed
evaluation standards. The most important criteria include e-learning content design
procedure and a learning model, interaction design, interface design, multimedia design,
and regular evaluations of content focused on the satisfaction of curriculum standards.

*(3) Quality control in instructional learning process.* Quality control in the
instructional learning process requires the following actions:
- Maximize instructor-student interaction, student-student interaction

- Induce participation of students in various ways

- Provide timely constructive feedback to assignments and students questions

- Clearly state each subject’s outline and learning objectives

- Provide enough reference resources including online library

- Use appropriate media technology and methods for delivery of instructional program

- Provide guidelines about effective learning strategies such as accuracy assessment of learning materials

- Provide guidelines for self-assessment of technological readiness for distance learning and self-motivation

- Provide enough load for learning

- Secure enough hours for learning and instruction

(4) A technology base appropriate for distance education. Distance education software should strike a balance between compatibility and useful functions for education. Policies need to be specified and documented regarding electronic security such as password protection, encryption, and backup systems to ensure quality standards, integrity, and accuracy of data. Technical stability should be secured to
minimize problems associated with systems being down. Moreover, central operational equipment and organization are necessary to support construction and management of distance education infrastructure.

(5) *Instructional support system.* A well-designed instructional support system should provide the following:

- Resources, facilities, equipment, and technology necessary for course development
- A support system for smooth transition for instructors from off-line instruction to online instruction
- Instructor training and peer support to help continual development of instructor expertise
- Manuals on regulations and authority regarding electronic information access and usage
- Specification and application of workload and compensation system for instructors taking into account the number of registered students and prep time for content development
- Detailed bylaws regarding intellectual property rights and stipulations of fair use including familiarity of instructors with the bylaws and stipulations
Student Aid

An online one-stop service system that includes the following services is desirable.

(1) Academic information service. A key service in this area is the provision of detailed academic information such as admissions criteria, admissions requirements, public relations, tuition, technological environment, textbooks, and so forth.

(2) Learning aid service. The following services are among the key elements to improve the student learning experience:

- Provision of information on various services, electronic database, book loans, and government publications and training on the use of such information systems

- Provision for online and face-to-face support and consulting, study guides, equipment, facilities, and instructional learning resources such as administrative consultants, digital libraries, and online bookstores

- Provision of services to promote student participation in the community

- Possession of technology to verify student identification for class attendance and other evaluation materials

(3) Complaint handling. Crucial is systematic handling of student complaints
and accurate, timely responses to inquiries filed at academic administrative departments.

Technology Base for Distance Education

The following should be included as a technology base necessary for distance education:

- Provision of technical support in the form of detailed manuals, orientation, and a help desk
- Establishment of a specialized task force to provide extensive and timely technical support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- Establishment and management by the central departments of distance education infrastructure
- Detailed specification and documentation of a technical support plan including protection of privacy, backup system, information management policy, and so forth.
- Detailed action plan for guaranteed system stability

Educational Evaluation

Key elements for educational evaluation in distance education include the following:

- Regular assessment of educational quality and its record keeping based on
evidence of academic achievement

- Administration at the university’s discretion of either online tests or off-line tests for academic achievement assessment

- Multi-faceted assessment of the educational effect of instructional programs based on number of registered students, investment cost, effects of employed technologies, and so forth.

- Overall assessment system that includes various detailed assessment criteria to measure effects of instructional learning and educational programs

- Absolute evaluation, not relative evaluation, is desirable for academic achievement evaluation

Instruction, Administration, and Support Organizations

Distance universities need organizations that ensure quality control of distance education. Organizations for instructional support, system management, marketing and public relations are given more emphasis in distance universities than in traditional off-line universities. Organizational structure exhibits more diversity in institutions that provide services in partnerships than in institutions that provide all services by themselves.

(1) Organizational characteristics. Distance universities need an organization
type appropriate for the academic administration model. Each and every department and process including its content development process, curriculum development, and delivery process need detailed work responsibility schedules, clarification of decision authority, and a system for verification of work progress.

The choice among alternative organization types such as independent or consortium, for-profit or non-profit, directly affects financing and allocation of resources, decision processes, and decision authority. An independent organization needs to establish partnerships to share risk and promote specialties. Partnerships between distance universities can take advantage of credit exchange, co-conferment of degrees, offerings of courses and programs based on partnerships with businesses, partnerships with IT businesses in content development and administration platform development, invitation of outside personnel for development of instructional content and university administration, and so forth. Partnerships can also bring additional services to distance universities such as portal site service, online instructional delivery, supplementary content provision, online libraries, online textbooks, academic consulting, teaching assistant service, and so forth. Higher education institutions are currently defined as non-profit organizations. A legal and institutional environment should evolve to allow higher education institutions to pursue profits in partnerships.
(2) Instructional organization. Instructional organization consists of faculty and assistants. Faculty may specialize in instruction, research, or administration, which need not be on a permanent basis. Assistants specialize in supporting instruction and research of faculty and are subject to contract renewal.

There may be an efficiency gain in utilizing faculty for teaching on a university wide basis rather than on an individual department wide or school wide basis. Smooth utilization of part-time instructors requires a specialized department for faculty recruiting on a contract basis. For institution faculty that specialize in instruction or research, the use of more part-time contract professors and less full time professors is often the approach that is utilized. However, an appropriate number of full time professors is needed for management of the department.

Faculty contracts on a course basis can differentiate the faculty salary and tuition by course according to the quality of the course and the number of students. Requirements for faculty qualification should be clearly stated, including the ability to deliver digital distance instruction. Appropriate training in advance or support to help faculty is necessary before beginning instruction.

(3) Support staff. Support staff consists of expert support staff and general
support staff. For support staff, an instruction can use an outside consortium, partnerships, or outsourcing.

- Expert support staff: quality control and assessment of instruction and instructional content development
- General support staff: general university administration, faculty recruiting departmental, marketing and public relations

(4) Quality control support organizations. A variety of support organizations are needed in distance universities for quality control of various aspects of the institution including the following:

[Insert figure 2 about here]

- Curriculum development and assessment, such as curriculum development, quality control in curriculum, assessment of education effect
- Content development, such as instructional design, graphic design, web programmer, multimedia development
- Student support, such as academic information, learning evaluation system, evaluation system for learning process, learning progress check, and so forth.
- Faculty support for instructional development, such as instructor training, consulting, instructional resource development
- Marketing and public relations, such as student recruiting, publicizing and sales of educational services, faculty recruiting

- System management, such as system development and operation, technical support services

Insook Lee is an associate professor, Department of Education, Sejong University in Korea. Her academic interests include inquiring the issues of self-regulation and organizational design in e-Learning environment. E-mail: inlee@sejong.ac.kr

Yeonwook Im, EdD, is an Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Technology, Hanyang Cyber University in Korea. Her research interests include online-learning, blended learning, building online learning community, computer mediated communication, designing educational strategy, evaluation of online learning, and web-based instruction. E-mail: ywim@hycu.ac.kr
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Figure 1. Academic Administration and Organizational Model of Digital Distance Universities

Figure 2. Structure of Support Organizations