

# Distance Education in UP: Options and Directions

**By**

**Felix Librero**

**Chancellor, UPOU**

**13 October 2004**

On 23 February 2005, the UPOU will celebrate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a constituent member of the UP System. These past ten years have been challenging in part because they were pioneering years for UP in the field of distance education. The initial years were particularly difficult because we were trying out a new thing and at the same time there was resistance to what we were doing. Some of us started with the UPLB project *Science Teaching Using Distance Instruction (STUDI)*, and the UP Distance Education Program. We did have the technical training and some experience in the design and preparation of instructional modules for independent learners. But some who joined the UPOU when it was established were being exposed to distance education for the first time. Those years are gone and we are now much more certain of what we can and cannot do. We have developed the necessary expertise to run an open university, a distance education institution. We are also much more keenly aware of what we should be doing to be able to effectively and efficiently manage the UPOU.

We have gained a lot of ground these last ten years. For example, we have been recognized by our peers in the Asian region (the UPOU served two terms on the Executive Board of the Asian Association of Open Universities, 1999-2004), designated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) as the National Center of Excellence for Open and Distance Education, and designated by the Information Technology and e-Commerce Council of the Philippines (now the Commission on Information and Communications Technology) as the e-Learning Competency Center of the Philippines. The UPOU Chancellor sits on the Governing Board of the SEAMEO Regional Center for Open Learning.

We have produced instructional packages, including books, which are now being bought and used by both professors and students from UP and other universities in the country. The UPOU is well on its way to being a major source of quality instructional materials, both in print and multimedia formats, for all educational institutions in the Philippines.

We have graduated more than a thousand in the fields of science teaching, mathematics teaching, public health, development communication, nursing, environmental management, research and development management, computer science, and education.

These graduates, now occupying responsible positions in education, government, and the private sectors, gained new knowledge and skills that are necessary in today's work environment. It is a unanimous observation among these graduates that being a distance learner is both challenging and satisfying; that, indeed, they have been given the opportunity to pursue advance studies through the UPOU, a university of a second chance.

However, there still is a fundamental issue that needs to be resolved. This is the management of the UPOU. Right now we are operating an open university within the framework of a conventional university. Unfortunately, the rules do not always apply. For instance, as an "open" institution, UPOU should not really require entrance examinations, nor should its students be subject to the MRR rule. Yet, we must apply these because we are part of the UP System.

The appropriate question at this point, I suppose, is: should there be a set of rules for the conventional campuses of UP and another for UPOU? Is this possible? Is it acceptable? I submit it can be possible and acceptable. But this would mean a major shift in policy regarding the basic configuration and operations of the UP System. Before this can happen, though, the UP System would have to decide first whether or not to maintain a strong presence in the field of distance education in the country. If the UP System believes that it should have a strong presence in the area of distance education in the Philippines, which it should, then it should maintain the UPOU and continue to support it so that UPOU retains its leadership role in open and distance learning in the country. If, on the other hand, the UP System feels that the University would be better off not being involved in the further development of distance education in the country, then it should let the UPOU go.

If the choice is the latter, then that is the end of discussion. If the choice is the former, then there are two basic issues to tackle now: shall the University of the Philippines continue being a multi-campus university, or should we not think of becoming a multiversity institution? The former is what exists today at UP. And this structure unfortunately is not designed to include the UPOU. If the choice is for the UPOU to remain with the UP System, the preferred structural model would be the multiversity model.

### **Towards a Multiversity System**

The UP System is comprised of seven constituent universities. For all intents and purposes, these constituent universities are "independent universities" but they belong to the same system under one Board of Regents and one president (including a set of system officials). Essentially, the UP System now has some elements of a multiversity system. While it can be argued that, other than the UPOU, all the constituent universities are conventional universities, they are actually different universities because they have different thrusts and priorities: basic sciences, humanities and the arts at UPD; agricultural and life sciences at UPLB; health sciences at UPM; fisheries and aquaculture

at UPV; Islamic and Mindanao studies at UPMIn; and Cordillera studies and math education at UPB. Then, of course, the UPOU is into distance education and open learning.

In effect, the UP System in its current configuration is really a multiversity system. As a multiversity system, UP may be bound by, say, a singular philosophy, a set of quality standards, and so forth. However, it may also formulate and apply different rules governing operations of the different universities given their unique circumstances. For instance, while the six constituent universities that do not maintain distance education programs may be subject to similar rules on academic programs and operations fit for conventional universities, there ought to be another set of rules that fit the configuration and nature of open and distance education.

This concept is based on the premise that the UP is essentially a corporation and the UPOU may be considered its subsidiary. As a subsidiary, therefore, UPOU can operate under specialized rules and regulations that fit its nature and requirements. At present, the UPOU is more of a special case being part of a conventional university system. Other open universities around the world are stand alone universities such as the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) of England, Sokhuthai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) of Thailand, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India, Universitas Terbuka (UT) of Indonesia, Open University (Universiti Terbuka) Malaysia (OUM), National Open University (NOU) of Taiwan, Korea National Open University (KNOU), Open University of Hongkong (OUH), and a host of other open universities worldwide.

### **Maintaining Quality Standards**

The crux of all the questions and arguments against distance education is the perceived watering down of quality of instruction and lowering of academic standards. Quality is a legitimate concern not only for the conventional campuses but for UPOU as well. We at the UPOU are as concerned about maintaining the “UP standard” as anyone else within the UP System because we know we are carrying the “UP imprimatur.” We were not outsiders who only recently came in with the UPOU. We have been with UP since day one of our student and professional lives and we know what a UP student must go through and what it takes to be a UP professor. We believed as well that there must be some alternative ways of delivering quality instruction in order to reach more Filipinos who seek quality education. We have never forgotten our concern for the “UP standard”. But maybe we have become more innovative.

In distance education, where the paradigm must be learner-centered, the instructional materials and modules play a very significant role. You must have high quality instructional materials if you want to maintain high quality instruction and academic standards. Instructional materials and modules can and are prepared according to strict standards, while the quality of live lectures of different professors can vary considerably. In any case, modules and instructional materials prepared at the UPOU are prepared by

teams, called quality circles, comprised of the module writer, module reader or critique, instructional designer, media specialist, and language editor, plus the fact that these materials are pre-tested and improved further before they are mass produced. Incidentally, the writers of UPOU are the same professors of UP who have undergone the module writing workshops of UPOU. Usually these individuals write the instructional modules for the same or similar courses that they teach in their respective campuses, and as Affiliate Faculty of the UPOU they also supervise these courses when offered.

There have been comments from some CU administrators that their problem with UPOU is that we are co-opting as affiliate faculty and writers “their best” professors. If, indeed, we are co-opting their best as our affiliate faculty and course writers, then the more there should be no question about maintaining standards of quality at the UPOU. Suffice it to say that we at the UPOU are as concerned about standards as anybody else because we value being part of the University of the Philippines System.

We have also put in place a system of procedures to ensure that the standards for design, preparation, and delivery of instructional materials, and assessment of learner performance are as stringent if not more so compared to conventional systems.

I have heard a comment from one Affiliate Professor that she has had to lower her standards in teaching distance students because they appeared to be unable to hack the subject matter if she followed her usual way of handling the course. This, sadly, is the professor’s own making because this has never been the policy of the UPOU. The policy has always been to maintain the UP standard in everything that we do. I wish to point out as well that it is not always a question of the student being unable to cope with the standard of instruction that is the problem. Sometimes, the problem is more a question of how a subject matter is taught.

All in all, at the UPOU, teaching is challenging and exciting. It forces one to be a creative facilitator of the learning process. Other UP professors should try it sometime.

Alongside with quality instructional materials is an efficient and effective learner support system. We offer our students online services in the areas of tutorials, enrollment, payment of fees using credit cards, access to grades and other important student information, interaction with tutors and professors, and a host of other services including online access to the UPOU Library. We do strive to provide the appropriate support services needed for independent learners to gain as much social interaction experiences as possible, short of regular weekly face-to-face encounters.

Our students are working students and have decided to come back to school precisely because they can study without leaving their jobs and families behind. They are a different breed of learners, highly motivated, very professional, brimming with experience and new ideas, and with self discipline. Even if they already have established social lives, the UPOU still provides them opportunities to interact with other distance learners through the judicious and well-planned use of technologies such as the Internet,

telecommunications systems, and other electronic communication devices, on top of some face-to-face interactions that are part of the over-all operations of the UPOU.

### **In Conclusion . . .**

I believe that the University of the Philippines must continue to lead in the further development and improvement of distance education in the Philippines. It is the only institution that can do justice of this alternative educational delivery system given its expertise, experience, programs, and human resources. That said, the UP should look into how it could allow the UPOU to operate under rules and regulations appropriate to the requirements of open learning and distance education. This is not extremely difficult since UP can introduce cutting edge innovations in university governance that would promote development and maintenance of high standards in distance education in the country.

Without UP providing the leadership in distance education in this country, we are almost certain that very low quality distance education will permeate the entire country. I am sure that UP does not like this to happen. It is its mandate to provide the best education the Filipino can aspire for. But there is a limit to UP's ability to accommodate more students into its cramped campuses. Its best alternative is to reach more Filipino learners through the UPOU.

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