

Germany—Commentary



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In just a few pages, Bernath and Stöter have offered a comprehensive overview of the emergence and development of distance education in Germany, one that describes in detail all the important milestones and structural elements in the history of distance education, from its early beginnings to the present day. The way in which they describe the conflicting and often extreme circumstances under which distance education in Germany has developed is particularly instructive, as is their observation that German distance education originated in the non-academic field and entered the world of academic education at a relatively late stage. One of the unique features of German distance education and its historical development is that, because the country was divided into two German states, there were two different approaches: a socialist-style of distance education in the east and a more western-style distance education in the west. It goes without saying that the socialist-style system of distance learning was no longer viable following the reunification of the two German states, and its demise was inevitable. Another factor highlighted by Bernath and Stöter is that distance education is divided into state (public) and private (commercial) sectors.

The entry of a host of commercial providers into the distance education sector lends support to the entrepreneurial notion that there is money to be earned with distance learning. This view appears to be based on the observation that distance education can achieve economies of scale that are impossible with on-campus teaching, as the latter is perceived and operated as a personnel-intensive service. In comparison, media-based teaching seems inexpensive to produce, as long as high turnover figures can be achieved. Growth rates in Germany are currently between four and six per cent, which is a further indicator of the economic appeal of distance education.

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Within academic discourse, distance education is often described as a form of self-directed learning, and it has been argued that this form of education reflects all of the different learning theory approaches that have emerged over time from education research. Bernath and Stöter offer a different interpretation, which stems from their interpretation of distance education as a form of adult education learning and teaching format that requires its own, separate discursive evaluation.

The authors then examine in detail the *FernUniversität* in Hagen—the leading distance education institution in Germany. This is no surprise, as the *FernUniversität* is not just Germany's largest higher education institution, but is also the only German university to offer its programmes entirely in a distance-learning format with distinct faculties for its programmes. In the same way that Britain's Open University was the role model for many of the world's distance education institutions, Hagen's university provided the blueprint for numerous distance learning providers within Germany. However, it must be added that the *FernUniversität* is a “bare bones” or special-interest university, as it offers a limited range of subjects within only four departments: Law, Economics, Mathematics and Computer Science and Cultural and Social Sciences.

With the founding of the *FernUniversität*, it is interesting to note that, from an education policy perspective, a project was implemented that had its origins in higher education policy ideas and reform plans of social democracy. This is an interesting parallel to England, where here, too, the Open University was one of the global flagships of distance education and owes its existence to the efforts of social democrats, specifically the Labour Party under Harold Wilson. In both cases, the universities were founded as politically-motivated projects aimed at establishing more equal opportunities for promoting social inclusion.

Although Germany's distance education sector is characterized by a growing momentum, when compared to on-campus study, the actual format of distance education plays only a minor role in this developing dynamic. The statistics provided by Bernath and Stöter clearly show that distance education is only the second most popular form of education in Germany, an occurrence also reflected in other parts of the world. Despite increasing demand for distance education in recent years, as well as higher acceptance levels, the dominant format is still the traditional face-to-face style of education. Ever since their first development over 800 years ago, universities have been attendance-based institutions, which continues to be the case today. Distance learning is merely an additional, alternative option for specific target groups.

In Germany, too, the emergence of digital educational media (which researchers refer to as a new generation of distance-education) has caused the boundaries between distance and on-campus learning to become increasingly indistinct and blurred. For example, in the terminology it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish between “distance”, “online education” and “blended learning”. Certain educational organizations are now offering online courses or online degree courses without linking them in any way to the concept of distance education and its traditions. Even the *FernUniversität* is committed to the concept of “Blended Learning”.

However, digitalisation has also given a new boost to distance education in Germany. Bernath and Stöter note that, in addition to the numerous government support schemes that have been launched to promote internet technology use, e-learning has also been given a new lease of life in recent years through the advent of MOOCs (massive open online courses), which make distance teaching and learning more attractive. IT-based distance education offers considerable improvements in the areas of interaction and communication, which is also a huge benefit. Not only will the impact of digital technology fundamentally change distance education in Germany, it will also require adjustments to be made at a statutory level. In this context, Germany's unique Distance Learning Protection Act, which was designed for an analogous rather than digital distance-education world, is an obsolete model and in dire need of reform.

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