

ICCE Became ICDE in 1982: What was Gained? What was Lost?

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A healthy organisation needs institutional memory. Much of this conference will obsess about the role of artificial intelligence in the future of distance education, but I shall remind you of our past. The name, membership and aims of ICDE have evolved in interesting ways since it was created 87 years ago in 1938, which is respectable longevity for a professional association. This is our 30th world conference and there are brief summaries of earlier conferences on the web. ICDE's history is quite well-documented.

When did ICDE start?

Correspondence education began in the mid-19th century and grew as postal services expanded. In 1936 a conference on supervised correspondence study was held in New York. One delegate was J. W. Gibson, director of high school correspondence instruction in British Columbia. Gibson knew leaders of correspondence education in other countries and suggested that it was time to get them together internationally. They convened in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, in 1938.

However, World War II then intervened, and ten years elapsed before the next international meeting was held in Nebraska and the International Council for Correspondence Education was formally created. The 3rd conference was held in 1950 in Christchurch, and we are back in New Zealand again for this 30th ICDE conference.

Developments in the 1970s

I attended my first ICCE conference 50 years ago. That was in Brighton, UK, in 1975, and I was at subsequent meetings in New Delhi in 1978 and Vancouver in 1982. It was an important time in the development of open learning, and it changed ICCE.

The UK Open University had welcomed its first cohort of 25,000 students in 1971. It was an immediate media sensation and soon enrolled more students than any other UK university. In those days only a tiny proportion of the population had access to university in most countries, so the UKOU model attracted governments that were seeking to make higher education more widely available.

In this context, a speech by Walter Perry, the founding vice-chancellor of the UKOU, was the star turn at ICCE's Brighton conference in 1975. In presenting the UKOU's multi-media learning system and its achievements Perry criticised earlier manifestations of correspondence education. He alleged that its business model relied on retaining the tuition fees of learners who dropped out early in their courses because the providers offered them little support.

ICCE's president at the time was David Young, head of the Rapid Results College, a large provider of correspondence teaching internationally. In response to Perry's criticism, he pointed out that organisations like his, which were funded solely by tuition fees, would also be able support students more fully if, like the Open University, they had access to public funds. This exchange highlighted a growing tension within the ICCE membership.

During the 1970s open universities were created in various countries. To celebrate its 10th anniversary in 1979, the UKOU held a conference for people involved in these new institutions. I represented Athabasca University and was tremendously impressed by the vigour, idealism and determination of leaders such as Otto Peters, who founded the German FernUniversität in 1974 and Wichit Srisa-an, who created the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand in 1978.

As the UKOU's conference wound up, Walter Perry proposed the establishment of a follow-up mechanism, such as a global association of open universities, which became a lively topic of discussion within the international distance education community. At ICCE's New Delhi conference in 1978 I was named programme chair for the upcoming 1982 Vancouver conference and put together a programme committee. In our discussions, notably with David Sewart of the UKOU and Kevin Smith of Australia's University of New England, we concluded that broadening ICCE's membership to embrace the expanding field of distance education would provide a better forum for discussing the issues of open universities than creating a separate association for a small number of institutions.

Renaming the Council

To expand the membership and scope of ICCE we needed to give it a fresh identity, because most of the people and institutions we wished to attract did not use the term 'correspondence education'. Settling on the term 'distance education' was easy, because it was widely used in the titles of papers submitted to the 1982 conference. We saw 'distance education' simply as a term to identify this educational sector among practitioners, not necessarily as a descriptor for institutional publicity, where many expressions were in use, chosen largely for their perceived appeal to students.

The motion to change ICCE to ICDE gained majority support at the Vancouver conference. Sadly, most of the commercial and military correspondence schools, which had been an important constituency of ICCE, did not renew their membership in subsequent years. In my view that this had less to do with the change of name than the shift of emphasis that became evident in Vancouver. ICDE acquired a stronger focus on higher education and on public sector institutions. Theory and research took a larger place than ICCE had seen previously.

What's in a name?

I shall stop there in this short trip down our institutional memory lane. Since 1982 ICDE has grown and diversified enormously, greatly aided by the decision of the Government of Norway, in 1988, to fund a permanent secretariat for the Council in Oslo. At that time ICDE became the International Council for Open and Distance Education, although the acronym ICDE was unchanged. The name has not changed since then although our field seems always to be looking for new descriptors. The Open University was originally called the 'University of the Air'. Wikipedia says that our field is 'online, open and technology enhanced education'. The theme of this conference is 'inclusive, scalable and sustainable' education. Tuesday's book launch referred to 'opening education by design'.

All this is healthy. Online learning, web-based learning and artificial intelligence are all changing distance education. I simply hope they will all continue to make it more open.