
Interviews
with
**Badrul
Khan**



Interview with Gerald Heeger

Badrul Khan: This is the era of open, flexible, and distributed learning, and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is one of the fastest growing universities in delivering flexible education throughout the world. Could you share with us your views on virtual education, as practiced by your institution?

Gerald Heeger: University of Maryland University College is one of 11 degree-granting institutions in the University System of Maryland. Now the second largest higher education institution in the state (stateside enrollment only) and one of the fastest growing universities in the country, UMUC was founded in 1947 to bring higher education opportunities to adults at times and places convenient to them. UMUC is also very much a global university. Since post-WWII, the University has been providing educational services to the military overseas. Today approximately 57,000 UMUC students are active-duty military service members and their dependents in the United States and in 28 foreign countries.

To serve an adult working population, the University has had to be both innovative and flexible. UMUC has offered courses in a variety of modalities: through correspondence, interactive video network (IVN), interactive televideo (ITV), voice mail, and today, extensively on the Web. This is in addition to traditional classroom courses, executive programs, short residency programs, and accelerated and mixed-format programs.

With the advent of the Internet and online education in the early 1990s, UMUC was especially prepared to launch its virtual university. For years we had been building the necessary infrastructure and the appropriate global orientation to make this possible. We had in place:

- A worldwide faculty and curriculum.
- A system of distributed learning and support services.
- A level of competency in managing both international operations and intellectual capital dispersion that few other institutions could rival, through our 50-year relationship with the military services.

Web-based learning—the delivery of courses and degree

programs online via the World Wide Web so that adults can learn at any time and from any place—was the next logical step. And we found that we were very good at it. Today, the University has more than 90,000 students at both virtual and on-site locations worldwide. Because of our history, online education wasn't as big of a philosophical leap at UMUC as it is at most other universities. No paradigm shift in mindset was required. As we'd been doing for several decades, we knew we must build our administrative structure *around the learner*.

BK: More and more educational institutions throughout the world are offering online education, but there have been numerous failures. Can you shed some light on why some have failed?

GH: The new educational marketplace, fueled by venture capital, reached its height during the dot.com frenzy in the late 1990s. Among the players were:

- Traditional institutions and adaptations
- For-profit providers/partnerships
- Portals
- Support services providers
- Online consortia

Why have so many e-learning initiatives NOT succeeded? Some obvious causes of failure in higher education online ventures are:

- Lack of brand recognition
- Lack of accreditation
- Unrealistic assessment of start-up costs and payback
- Inadequate infrastructure or technology base
- Minimal training and support for faculty
- Lack of full understanding of the range of online services required to educate students virtually
- The e-learning enterprise was marginalized and under-funded
- Not tying the e-learning operation to the institution's mission

BK: After reflecting on different kinds of online and blended-learning environments, I have found that there are many critical issues that we must address in order to be successful in virtual education. Please discuss from your own experience some of the issues that you have encountered.

GH: With regard first to *resource support* services for students, one problem with online education today is that students taking online courses are enormously frustrated when they can't get *all* of the support services online as well. A failure of e-learning is that organizations can't seem to think systematically about it. To an increasing degree, students think they are buying much more than online courses when they enroll. Whatever **you** think, **they** think they are buying "enrollment and registration services," "payment services," "library and information services," "advisement," "record-keeping," and so forth. We determined that the online student should not be at a disadvantage. We have committed that every service at the

University must be adapted to the distance student.

With regard to *administrative affairs*, for most institutions, such a rapid move from the traditional to the virtual classroom would have been overwhelming—structurally as well as financially. Building the infrastructure alone to support fully Web-based learning is a mammoth task. Then there are issues of how to train students and faculty to effectively use the online environment; how to provide essential wraparound Web-based student and faculty services; how to finance and build the technology infrastructure to sustain an extensive online operation, and many others.

There are many lessons we learned on the road to a successful virtual university. We found, for example, that the move to online technology has changed the way we do business. It has increased our cost-consciousness and the way we handle cost management and accountability. One result is that we now have created investment set-asides to fund the technological base of our operations, since only some of our funding comes from the State of Maryland.

Our worldwide presence has added another dimension to our decision-making. In the past, we operated three fairly autonomous university divisions—in Maryland, Germany, and Japan. Our expanding virtual university has caused us to reconsider the wisdom of this. Now we are in the process of implementing a single worldwide curriculum and faculty—a challenging task nearly completed.

With regard to *technological* issues, we decided, at the beginning, to build our own proprietary platform to host our online courses. We continually benchmark this platform (we call it WebTycho) against commercial competitors to assure that what we are offering our students is state-of-the-art. In addition, we have invested \$35 million in a new PeopleSoft Enterprise Information System that will integrate our course delivery platform with our worldwide student information system and also give us a single human resources and financial infrastructure to undergird our virtual and worldwide operations. The high cost of this sophisticated system speaks for itself. In the technologically driven environment in which we operate as a university, we have decided that all of our face-to-face courses should also be Web-enhanced, and this, too, carries a price tag with it.

We also maintain redundant sets of server clusters—in Maryland, Germany, and Japan—to assure that our students will always be able to access their online classrooms. All of this has been costly, but essential, if we are to remain on the cutting edge of service to adult students.

Some *management* issues we faced have included:

- Ensuring that all online courses have the same quality as face-to-face courses and that the level of academic support and student services we provide our students is as rich online as in the face-to-face environment.
- Guaranteeing complete Web-based degree programs to students at a distance so they can complete their degrees in a timely manner.
- Assuring that the asynchronous learning environment we are providing our students is highly interactive and provides a rich learning experience.

BK: Virtual education is a new experience to many of us. As more and more institutions offer e-learning worldwide, we will continually become more knowledgeable about what works well and what does not work. Considering your experience in virtual education, can you share with us things that you think need improvement in virtual education?

GH: One challenge for universities is to consider why faculty needs necessarily to be at the same physical location as the university. If an online course is on Latin American economics, why not have a Latin American professor located in Latin America teach it?

Expansion of information and communication technologies has not only empowered Western content to permeate world culture—a fact often decried—but also has stimulated new capabilities on the part of developing nations to communicate within themselves, among themselves, and globally. Yet, despite the new level of interconnectedness, of new types of institutions for commerce and for communication, higher education is only a marginal participant. We remain highly localized, closely linked to national and local agendas, consumed by the challenges we face—limited resources, growing demand—but, almost always, inward-facing. Especially for open universities, education capacity-building has been a national rather than a global preoccupation.

So far, higher education's most visible contribution to a 'globalized world' is largely a conversation between citizens of the wealthiest and most rapidly developing countries. Countries on the 'economic periphery'—where the demand for higher education is growing most rapidly—remain marginal to this exchange.

I would suggest a new collaboration, a "supra-national" university—or, a "network for global, open learning"—defined as a set of technologically-linked relationships built out of clusters of open universities worldwide. To "build" such a university, member open universities would agree to pool existing assets and to make them transferable and scalable as a means of building capacity.

Faculty from participating open universities, trained in the pedagogy of online teaching, could deliver courses through the Web to students not only in their home country, but worldwide:

- Students, when admitted to a collaborating institution, could take courses simultaneously or sequentially from both institutions.
- They would gain exposure to new perspectives and approaches in their international virtual classrooms.
- They would also be trained in the protocols of learning effectively online and in Web-based information literacy (learning how to access and evaluate the extensive resources available on the Web).
- Faculty would benefit from increased opportunities for collaboration with colleagues around the world and would gain expertise in online course delivery to bring back to their home institutions.
- Courses could be jointly developed and/or delivered by faculty from two or more institutions, adding breadth and cross-cultural perspectives to the

classroom.

- Capacity to put existing courses and degrees online could be built at participating open universities, expanding multifold courses available to students. (Until such capacity is built, UMUC, for example, could host newly-developed online courses on its own servers).
- Digital library resources could be shared, greatly expanding the scholarly resources available to students and faculty at all institutions at much lower cost.

This network of open universities would bring greatly expanded opportunities to a growing global student body through the large-scale delivery of quality online higher education. It would also create a new level of interconnect- edness among participating open universities. In virtual space, a true global dialogue between North and South, East and West could take place and ideas shared and complex issues debated. Our students everywhere so badly need exposure to ideas and cultures that differ from their own.

It is only through technology that this has been possible. Technology has changed the relationship between people and knowledge in ways unimaginable a decade ago. It has reinvented higher education, and it is through the unique innovation that exists in academia that technology can “globalize” higher education for lifelong learners worldwide. UMUC has been a trail blazer for more than 50 years, and I expect we will lead this effort well into the 21st century. □

*University of Maryland University College (UMUC) President **Gerald A. Heeger**, the university's fourth president since 1947, has had an important impact on the university's faculty, staff, and students in 29 countries since taking the post in August 1999.*



Heeger's more than 30 years in higher education have taken him around the globe as an educator and lifelong learner. Most recently, he served for eight years as dean of New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

Widely respected as an academic and administrator, Heeger is cited frequently for his creativity in partnering higher education with corporations and for innovation in program development. At UMUC, he has endeavored to help create educational opportunities for thousands more students—worldwide—for whom traditional course delivery

is inadequate or even impossible. Heeger earned political science degrees at the University of California, Berkeley (BA), and the University of Chicago (MA, PhD). He calls himself "a very traditionally educated academic," yet eagerly identifies with today's adult student who chooses increasingly to obtain higher education in "the new Internet space."

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