ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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In 1964, the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec, better known as the "Parent Commission," outlined changes that would radically alter the province's educational landscape. The theme throughout the report was accessibility for all, representing a way to rethink, reorganize, and redefine our relationship to education.

Distance-learning institutions, which emerged as a direct result of this new dynamic, at both the university and college levels, have appropriated this concept of accessibility. More than any other educational arrangement, distance learning, due to its use of media and its de-synchronization of teaching and learning occurrences, truly embodies accessibility. Today, with the emergence of hybrid instruction that alternates between face-to-face and distance measures, along with the arrival of MOOC (massive open online courses), the quest for accessibility continues and can be seen in the search for models that are flexible in terms of both time and space.

This article aims to show the various forms of accessibility in the context of distance learning through some of its fundamental components. This entails describing how, what first appeared to be challenges, turned out to be assets, both for this approach to instruction and for access to higher education. This text will also indicate the ground that still needs to be covered before the outcomes targeted in the Parent report can be deemed achieved.
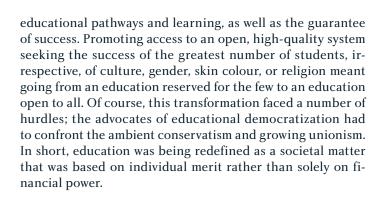
JUST WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY?

"Accessibility" is one of those terms that appear to be defined the same way by everyone. For the purposes of this article, however, a short definition of the term is in order. Consulting a number of sources confirms the fact that "accessibility" has a range of meanings.

Le Petit Robert (2001) defines accessibility as "the possibility to access, to arrive at," while it sets out the state of being accessible as "where one can access, arrive, enter. That which presents no obstacles. That which can be approached, seen, encountered. That which is open, responsive" [translation]. More specifically in the field of education, Legendre's dictionary (2005) describes accessibility first, from a general point of view, as "the state of being easily addressed, achieved, approached and integrated," then, from a more specific point of view, as "the state of being understandable, intelligible" [translation].

This latter definition can be directly connected with the term's use in the Parent report, which emphasizes education's importance and role in a democratic society. The report also notes that the "education system—as a system—must, in modern societies, pursue a threefold aim" [translation]. In other words, it must:

> "• bring within the reach of all people, regardless of belief, race, culture, social background, age, gender, physical health, or mental abilities, a quality education that meets the diversity of needs;
>
> • allow each and every individual to pursue studies in a field that best matches their aptitudes, tastes, and interests, up to the most advanced level he or she can achieve, and thereby to take advantage of everything that can contribute to their complete fulfilment;
>
> • prepare all young people for life in society; in other words, making a living through useful work and intelligently assuming all social responsibilities in a spirit of equality and liberty, as well as offer adults the greatest possibilities for development" (MEQ, 1964) [translation].

Based on these findings, the concept of accessibility is synonymous with the possibility of accessing education. This is also the sense found in the Legendre dictionary, which long prevailed, approximately into the 1980s. At this point, the meaning of "accessibility" started to shift as a result of social changes and societal needs. Indeed, the idea of success was added to the term's initial characteristics. More specifically, even if the importance of access to an education system remained, it was complemented by the need for high-quality

educational pathways and learning, as well as the guarantee of success. Promoting access to an open, high-quality system seeking the success of the greatest number of students, irrespective, of culture, gender, skin colour, or religion meant going from an education reserved for the few to an education open to all. Of course, this transformation faced a number of hurdles; the advocates of educational democratization had to confront the ambient conservatism and growing unionism. In short, education was being redefined as a societal matter that was based on individual merit rather than solely on financial power.

ACCESSIBILITY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

This increasing democratization is the basis from which distance learning emerged, with accessibility as one of its chief missions. In order to fulfill this mission, however, a variety of constraints needed to be addressed, all of which were intrinsically related to the same issue of distance. The following is an overview of these constraints.

Geographical distance and accessibility

First of all, distance learning implies that the student does not need to travel to an institution or training centre. Indeed, the teacher and student are not in the same geographical location. Abolishing distance clearly increases access to higher education, especially for students located at some far from major educational institutions where program and course offerings are greater and more diversified. Eliminating geographical distance makes it possible to redistribute program offerings as well as to increase the accessibility of education, by offering every student the possibility to access knowledge, free from the constraints of geographical location. Moreover, in cases in which students have no need to travel, distance learning fosters regional attachment, in more rural areas, thereby helping to maintain educational centres and to stimulate local economies.

Temporal distance and accessibility

In addition to eliminating the need to travel, distance learning allows individuals to study at their own convenience. In on-campus education, the students need to gather in the same place at the same time, which implies that they all have the same availability and readiness to learn. However, with asynchronous distance learning, students are free to choose their own time and pace of learning. In this approach, learning therefore generally takes place at times chosen by each individual student and remains inherently dissociated from the teaching act.

Pedagogical distance and accessibility

In face-to-face education, teaching and learning processes take place through educational situations occurring at the same time and in the same place. In distance learning, however, the separation of the teaching and learning acts requires that all of the educational materials be prepared in advance which requires to anticipating students' different trajectories. "Transactional distance" (Moore, 1980), as it is known, illustrates the de-synchronization of the teaching and learning acts, and demonstrates not only that the the two are distinct, but also and especially that they can take place in different places and at different times, hence broadening access to education. It would therefore be an oversimplification to considere that developing a distance course simply consists of putting instructional documents online; it demands a well-structured, rigorous, and methodical process that takes many different parameters into account. The instructional materials must comply with the imperatives of mediatisation, teaching design, and the learning process. With the arrival of information and communications technologies, the modelling of learning environments has fostered the establishment of diverse pathways that can take into account the specificities of each learner. This tends to take into consideration student particularities, depending on their abilities, as well as their needs. In this context and with these types of tools, distance learning "does not impose on students pedagogical approaches that force them to adopt practices incompatible with their skills, their learning style, or a type of learning that does not meet their needs" (Deschênes and Maltais, 2006).

Technological distance andaccessibility

Distance learning is not a new phenomenon; what is known today as "online education" has a long history. Indeed, distance learning in the past included correspondence courses and audio or videocassette courses. Distance learning is inherently media-based. Whether the medium is print, audio-visual, or ICT-reliant, these media play and will continue to play an essential role in this approach. In distance learning, all of the teaching functions usually assumed by the teacher are mediatized with the help of tools, such as printed materials, computer screens, videos, etc.

As Peraya (2001) put it, "teaching in distance learning means teaching in a disconnected mode." One of the major challenges with designing distance courses lies in the choice of media used to support students in learning situations. Each medium has its own specific features and it is important to ensure that the chosen medium truly suits the designer's educational intent or else there is a risk of limiting content accessibility and hence student success. Following the mass arrival of information and communications technologies at the start of the 1980s, and later the Internet in the 1990s, new media possibilities emerged, making it possible to combine different tools as well as diversify the means of guidance that could be provided to students remotely. These technological innovations, surely like those that are still to come, facilitate access to various educational contents and provide support for faraway students—but only on the condition that education comes first and the technology is there to support it.

> *… designing a distance course demands a well-structured, rigorous and methodical process that takes many different parameters into account.*

Geographical, temporal, pedagogical and technological distances are all changes that distance learning has not only addressed but also assimilated. Accordingly, these elements have become part and parcel of this type of education and constitute considerable assets for widening access to higher education. The results speak for themselves. The initial prejudice against distance learning has been reversed, given that this approach has become widespread in university settings and is also gaining ground in the college sector. Today, the line between on-campus education and distance learning is getting thinner. This is evidenced by hybrid or blended instruction,[1] as well as the emergence of MOOCs. In his report on distance-learning enrollment since 1995, Saucier (2011) noted a steady increase in enrollments and pointed out the role that this approach plays in education accessibility, irrespective of the level of instruction. Clearly, the trend is strong. In 2009, Statistics Canada concluded that 25% of adult students were enrolled in a distance-learning program and, according to data compiled by Saucier (2011), distance-learning enrollments have climbed an overall 148% over 15 years. As the number of students taking distance courses has increased, the offer of such courses has kept pace. The *Répertoire de l'enseignement à distance français*, published by REFAD in 2012, indicated that some 50 Canadian institutions that year were offering over 2,500 distance courses in French, including natural sciences, humanities, and technical-training courses.

◗ **ACCESSIBILITY: WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE**

Without denying the obvious appeal of distance learning, some caveats need to be expressed. Much ground needs to be covered before accessibility becomes a core value for institutions. Although the principle of democratizing education may not be in question, we cannot ignore the fact that access to postsecondary education remains a work in progress (Chenard et al., 2013).

As the Parent Report has just passed the half-century mark, Rocher (2004) points out that all of the studies on the schooling of Quebec's population over the past 40 years have arrived at the same mixed conclusions. The education level of Quebec's population has considerably increased over these past decades compared to 1960. Avignon (2012) notes that between 1960 and 2012, the rate of access to college education rose from 16% to 61%. The rate of access to university education, for its part, increased from 7% to 45% (MELS, 2011). Higher enrollment in educational institutions, however, does not necessarily guarantee an increase in qualifications in society, since a large segment of Quebec's current population has been found lacking in basic education. Worse still, in the era of the knowledge society, the latest OECD study performed in 2013 on the assessment of adult skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in highly technological environments shows that approximately 1.2 million adults in Quebec have low reading proficiency (OCDE, 2013). This directly affects how individuals function in society. In addition, roughly 2.2 million Quebec adults are not literate enough to achieve their full potential. Several causes can account for this state of affairs. According to Avignon (2012):

> "the rise of ultraliberal practices and the retreat of the welfare state have, of course, affected educational funding. The increase in academic enrollment and the growing heterogeneity of the student population have likewise not been without consequences. In Quebec, the Estates General on Education in the mid-1990s and, more recently but on a more limited scale, the Ménard report on high-school dropouts, have underlined that many young people never earn a high-school diploma. In spite of certain fluctuations, access to higher education has stabilized, particularly since the 1990s. At the start of the 1990s, the rate of access to university education already

[1] The concept of "blended instruction" refers to the coexistence of different educational arrangements within the same institution. "Hybrid instruction" refers to a situation in which an educational path incorporates face-to-face as well as distance education.

> stood at 40%. Preoccupations in the world of education have evolved in step with the search for ways to improve this situation, shifting from the target of access to the target of success, from entry to perseverance."

Although this data was drawn from studies of "on-campus education," distance learning cannot afford to neglect these observations, first and foremost because it is and must be considered to be a key player in the world of education. Moreover, it has challenges to overcome, such as eliminating dropping out, which, still today, represents the endemic problem with this mode of education. Kember (1990; 1999) has shown that the reasons for dropping out in distance learning are multifaceted and relate to students' inability to integrate the various dimensions of their situations, namely work, family, community, and student life, with all of these components systematically affecting the others. Given that, which modes of distance learning should be put in place in order to allow students to optimally integrate these facets of their lives? Which measures should be carried out to increase access to and success in distance learning? Many different avenues could be suggested, including the following three.

ACCESSIBILITY, REQUIREMENTS FOR ENROLLMENT, AND TEACHING METHODS

One of the first avenues that could be explored has to do with the administrative dimension of enrollment in higher education. Distance learning is supposed to be an open, flexible, and innovative model serving students; it most often appears as a vehicle for improving access to education. Yet there is a paradox in that certain distance-learning institutions impose admission conditions such as enrollment periods or authorization to study in partnership. Similarly, certain distance-learning programs implement teaching methods that run directly contrary to access, such as establishing cohorts so as to yield a greater volume of discussion on forums. Although these constraints can be explained by administrative and teaching prerogatives, one might question whether other models of management or course design might be used in order to allow students to begin their courses at the time of their choosing, with the greatest possible flexibility, while maintaining the quality of education.

ACCESSIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY

In an era of digital ubiquity, it also seems essential to assess the accessibility of distance learning in terms of the media used. Even if distance learning largely developed through correspondence courses and even if these courses are still around today, there is a good chance that distance courses based on digital technologies will continue to develop and gain prominence. As a result and to avoid falling into a kind of digital illiteracy, the various actors involved in distance learning have a responsibility to make sure that the technologies used to disseminate courses are both easily available and user friendly. Ideally, a student should not have to master a new technology in order to access the course materials. If this is the case, however, then one of the course's objectives —over and beyond its initial goals—should be to enable students to achieve proficiency with this tool. In addition, provisions should be made within the course for this learning to occur. In other words, when it comes to accessibility and technology, the media used to disseminate educational materials must not act as barriers for students in distance courses. Otherwise, the technology would constitute a major impediment to the accessibility of such courses.

ACCESSIBILITY AND UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY IN EDUCATION

Finally, consistent with the Parent report, education should be for everyone, including individuals with special needs, such as students with learning difficulties or physical, motor, or neurological disabilities. In this context, the universal design of instruction (UDI) would result in:

> "the creation of environments and curricula intended for all students, regardless of their abilities and learning styles. Students will be able to pick and choose from among several possible solutions in accordance with their learning styles" (Barile et al., 2013).

Because of their flexibility, digital learning environments —more than any other type of media—offer the possibility of implementing flexible solutions that are well-adapted to the needs of every student. Distance learning appears to be one of the educational models best suited for taking on the challenge of universal access. There can be little doubt that, in the coming years, this area of research will be one of the most relevant and promising from a societal perspective.

◗ CONCLUSION

The role of distance learning in access to higher education has been firmly established. Along with other models in the world of education, this form of learning is highly consistent

with the orientations of the Parent report. Distance learning seems to have acquired a preponderant role in the university context, so much sothat the institutions that exclusively offer face-to-face courses on campus are now few and far between. In the world of college education, interest in distance learning is also unmistakably emerging. Evidence of this can be seen in the growing number of agreements between distance-learning institutions and, in particular, colleges located in more rural areas, or the establishment of partnerships between various school boards and CEGEPs. From this standpoint, distance learning is clearly no passing fad and must be considered a key player in expanding access to higher education.

> The role of distance learning in the accessibility of higher education is now firmly established.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that accessibility is not only about the ability to reach out to the greatest possible number of students, but also about the ability to offer quality instruction that will ensure the success of all students. In this respect, like other educational models, distance learning must hold itself to high standards while striving to increase graduation rates. Only under these conditions can accessibility, as it has been viewed now for more than 50 years, be achieved.

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