

## Distance and Hybrid Learning at the University of the Nations: Past, Present, and Future Potential

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### Abstract

This article examines the development and potential of distance and hybrid learning at the University of the Nations (UofN), with a focus on the Genesis Centre's role in developing and extending educational opportunities globally. Initiated in the 1990s, the Genesis Centre adapted videoconferencing technologies to bridge remote classrooms worldwide, fostering an interactive, faith-centred learning experience in geographically isolated regions. By exploring historical, biblical, and educational perspectives, this study analyses the evolution of these learning methods, incorporating survey and interview data from educators and users. The findings reveal insights into how the UofN's live-learn model can adapt within a digital learning environment while preserving the core principles of Christian formation and community.

Keywords: Distance learning, hybrid learning, University of the Nations, UofN, YWAM, Genesis Centre, mission-centred education, Christian education, adult education

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The University of the Nations (UofN) is a global Christian university affiliated with Youth With A Mission (YWAM) and has utilised technology to enhance access to education while upholding its distinctive focus on discipleship and cross-cultural service. Co-founded by Loren Cunningham and scientist Dr Howard Malmstadt, the UofN was built upon a vision of community-based education. The *live-learn* model, a hallmark of the UofN's pedagogical approach, emphasises holistic development through community interaction, where students and faculty engage in both formal and informal settings that facilitate spiritual growth.

In the early 1990s the Genesis Centre of the University of the Nations was developed, rising from a desire to use developing technologies to multiply training courses globally and still retain the core quality and DNA of the university and of Youth With A Mission.

Youth With A Mission and the University of the Nations have often been pioneering in the use of new technologies to serve the training methods in the classroom and as such are often 'standing on the shoulders' of those who have gone before. This study looks at both the history and use of distance learning tools in higher education, from postal correspondence lessons in the 1840s to the now ubiquitous Zoom meeting culture of today. Many lessons were learned by institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we consider some of the applications and future opportunities for us in the UofN.

As we have now returned to our new 'normal', (after being required to use online tools during the pandemic), this paper considers the relevance, need and future potential of integrating distance and hybrid learning in the UofN.

## Literature Review

### Historical Context and Evolution of Distance Learning

Distance learning, in its earliest forms, facilitated education across physical and temporal boundaries, paralleling early Christian mentorship models where leaders such as the Apostle Paul maintained instruction through written correspondence. Paul's letters to Timothy, to churches, and other disciples represent early forms of sustained mentorship and education at a distance, laying foundational principles for what was later formalised in modern distance learning systems.

Five hundred years ago, new technologies were developed in Europe to enable the wider distribution of Scriptures in the language of the people through Gutenberg's development of the printing press.

In the 19th century, distance learning took on a more structured format. Sir Isaac Pitman's shorthand writing courses in the 1840s received and marked 10,000 letters per year in the mail. Many of these students developed intimate friendships with one another and only met each other for the first time at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London (Baker, 1919, p. 113). The University of London also launched degree courses by distance in 1858 marking key steps in enabling students to pursue education remotely. These models broadened access to higher education and gradually integrated new forms of communication, such as radio and television.

One hundred years ago the New Zealand Correspondence School was formed to provide primary education to children in remote locations. This was later updated to have weekly radio broadcasts of classes. Many New Zealanders serving as missionaries overseas were able to have their children receive distance learning by correspondence (NZ History, 2022).

In 1963 the UK Prime Minister announced that a new university 'A university of the air' would be formed to bring education to the masses and also to take advantage of new technologies (The Open University, n.d.). This led to the Stirling University in Scotland offering modular degree courses from 1967, and shortly afterward for The Open University offering courses on a modular basis - studying one course/subject at a time via distance learning methods available at the time. The Open University in Scotland gained a reputation for reaching out and, while 'being distant, was also nearby' (Weinbren, 2019).

The 1960s and 70s also saw the development of decentralised theological education models, like Theological Education by Extension (TEE), which allowed Christian leaders in Africa and Latin America to study within their communities, applying their learning immediately in ministry contexts (Burton, 2000).

In the early 1990s Dr Howard Malmstadt (co-founder of the University of the Nations) saw the potential impact of emerging technologies on a global university (Feaver, 2007) and this led toward the leadership in YWAM Lausanne looking to use existing videoconference tools to link classrooms together in an interactive learning experience called Genesis (Fountain, 1996).

As digital technologies evolved in the 1990s, distance learning transitioned to internet-based platforms, which enabled both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning. These advancements fostered the development of interactive distance education. UofN's Genesis Centre exemplified this shift by introducing live videoconferencing, connecting distant classrooms in a format that supported interactivity and relational engagement, key elements in Christian education.

Today's hybrid and blended learning models continue to draw from these foundations, incorporating flexibility and accessibility through digital tools.

### **Biblical Foundations and Technological Integration**

The University of the Nations' approach to education, particularly through the Genesis Centre, is deeply rooted in biblical traditions that emphasise mentorship, community, and cross-cultural discipleship. The Genesis Centre's foundation in Habakkuk 2:14—"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (ESV, 2001)—captures the vision for UofN to extend Christian education to remote and underserved regions.

Loren Cunningham and Howard Malmstadt envisioned UofN as a global Christian university that would not only transfer academic knowledge but also promote spiritual and personal transformation. Cunningham's emphasis on *live-learn* education encouraged instructors and students to live and learn within a close-knit community, creating a 'family-like' environment that reinforced Christian values through everyday interactions and mentorship. Malmstadt's background in science and technology led him to see digital tools as vehicles for UofN's mission, providing opportunities to facilitate direct, real-time engagement across distances (Feaver, 2007). His view that videoconferencing allowed participants to 'see each other's eyes' underscored the importance of preserving the relational aspect of learning, even when students and teachers were geographically dispersed.

### **Learning Theories and Technology's Impact**

Technology and the associated tools are mostly neutral, they do not have a soul, but they can be used for good or evil. The creator or inventor had a purpose in mind, and we, as Christians, can change things for the good of mankind.

Educational theories on the use of technology in instruction suggest that tools are most effective when they support rather than overshadow the learning objectives. Mangalwadi (2011) argues that societies with biblical foundations often adopt technology as a means of improving societal welfare, rather than simply for efficiency or convenience. In line with this view, UofN has used technology to support its mission of holistic education, enhancing accessibility without diminishing the quality of personal engagement.

Postman (1992) critiques the role of technology in education, suggesting that it may divert attention from traditional learning values by introducing fragmented, shallow experiences. Lanier (2018) says that social media technologies (Facebook etc) manipulate our behaviour, often without us realising it. Postman also reminds us that 'every technology is both a burden and a blessing' (p.11).

However, Ogilvie (2009) presents an alternative view, contending that technology, when used judiciously, can serve the deeper purposes of education, including spiritual formation and critical thinking. UofN's implementation of the Genesis Centre reflected a similar perspective, using technology not as an end in itself but as a tool to extend the university's unique live-learn model.

### **Distance and Hybrid Learning Models**

Distance and hybrid learning models, including flipped classrooms, blended, and hybrid formats, are widely explored in educational research (Al-Enzi et al., 2023). Each model brings unique pedagogical benefits, but success often hinges on careful adaptation to student needs and learning styles (Madhu & Bhattachryya, 2023).

## **Christian Formation in a Hybrid Learning Environment**

The live-learn model at UofN integrates formal education with informal community interactions, aiming to cultivate spiritual formation alongside academic knowledge. This holistic approach resonates with theological perspectives on discipleship, where learning happens in the context of daily life and shared spiritual practices. As UofN extends its live-learn philosophy to distance education, it faces the challenge of replicating these formative interactions in virtual environments.

Hockridge (2015) posits that spiritual formation, while traditionally pursued in person, can be effectively adapted to online settings that prioritise community-building. In the Genesis Centre's hybrid model, instructors have noted that spiritual growth and mentorship can be maintained, provided that virtual interactions are intentional and reflect UofN's core values. This adaptation underscores UofN's commitment to personal transformation, a distinctive aspect of its mission that differentiates it from secular distance education models.

### **Methodology of Field Research**

To evaluate the impact of distance and hybrid learning at UofN, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection. This approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Genesis Centre's influence and its applicability to modern Christian education.

#### **Qualitative Component**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen current or former UofN leaders, all of whom had significant experience with the Genesis Centre's distance learning model. These participants were selected from UofN's global faculty network, with participants from Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Pacific, ensuring that the data reflected a global perspective on distance learning challenges and opportunities. The interviews focused on participants' personal experiences with the Genesis Centre, its impact on remote learning, and the challenges associated with implementing UofN's live-learn model in a distance format. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives on the Centre's past achievements and future potential.

#### **Quantitative Component**

In addition to interviews, a survey was distributed to the 436 users of UofN's Zoom account group. The survey gathered data on users' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of hybrid learning at UofN. Of the 436 participants, 118 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of approximately 27%. The survey contained multiple-choice and open-ended questions, enabling respondents to provide both quantitative data and qualitative feedback on their experience with distance learning technology, specifically videoconferencing, at UofN. This data was analysed to identify common themes and trends.

#### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data from interviews was analysed thematically, with attention to recurring themes such as technological challenges, spiritual formation, and the role of community in hybrid learning. Quantitative survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics, which provided insights into users' satisfaction, perceived benefits, and challenges with UofN's hybrid learning approach.

## Results

### Interview Results

The interviews conducted with UofN leaders provided an in-depth review of the Genesis Centre's development, the role of technology in distance learning, and some of the broader pedagogical implications. This section synthesises insights from those interviews, focusing on three key areas: the historical and technological journey of the Genesis Centre, the challenges and adaptations in teaching methods, and the influence of UofN's live-learn model on distance learning.

#### *Historical and Technological Journey of the Genesis Centre*

Interview participants recounted the Genesis Centre's pioneering efforts in the 1990s, when UofN adopted videoconferencing as a means to connect geographically dispersed campuses. Many respondents described the early days of videoconferencing as a groundbreaking innovation that bridged distances, enabling synchronous instruction across multiple continents. Initially, videoconferencing relied on expensive ISDN phone lines and proprietary equipment, limiting its use to locations with adequate financial resources and technical support.

Participants highlighted how the Genesis Centre's use of videoconferencing provided students in remote regions access to high-quality instruction, often in areas where local resources were limited. Respondents noted that many campuses in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia benefited significantly, as the technology allowed them to connect with UofN's main hubs and participate in live, interactive classes. These pioneering efforts marked an important step in democratising Christian education, particularly for students who would have otherwise been isolated from UofN's educational offerings.

However, respondents also recalled the high operational costs and technical issues. Bandwidth limitations, audio-visual synchronisation issues, and limited technical support often disrupted classes, creating frustrations for instructors and students alike. Despite these challenges, many interviewees emphasised that the Genesis Centre's mission of 'breaking isolation' remained undeterred, as the value of real-time, interactive education was deemed worth the associated difficulties. These experiences underscored the commitment within UofN to provide equitable access to education, irrespective of geographic location.

#### *Adapting Teaching Methods to Distance Learning*

The interview responses also highlighted the significant pedagogical shifts that distance learning required. Many instructors initially struggled to adapt their teaching styles for a virtual environment, where physical presence and direct interaction were limited. Several respondents noted that traditional teaching methods often did not translate effectively to videoconferencing. For instance, techniques that relied on body language, eye contact, and real-time feedback needed modification or replacement with methods more suited to the medium.

Respondents discussed specific adjustments made to foster engagement and interactivity in online classes. For example, one instructor shared how they incorporated 'virtual breakout rooms' for small group discussions, an adaptation intended to replicate the intimate, community-building activities typical in UofN's live-learn model. Others used polling tools, Q&A sessions, and visual aids more frequently to maintain student engagement. Some instructors advocated a flipped classroom approach, where students reviewed materials before class and used live sessions for discussion, questions, and deeper exploration. This shift allows instructors to focus on interaction during synchronous sessions, which interviewees found effective in maintaining a sense of connection with students.

Another key adaptation involved timing and pacing. Many instructors noted that online learning required shorter, more structured sessions to accommodate the limitations of virtual attention spans. Several respondents observed that they had to break down complex material into smaller, more manageable segments and provide frequent breaks or activities to keep students engaged. Interviewees mentioned that these adaptations improved their teaching approaches and had lasting impacts on their pedagogical styles, with some adopting these changes in their in-person teaching post COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Influence of the Live-Learn Model on Virtual Interactions***

The live-learn model, central to UofN's educational philosophy, emphasises learning through community and daily life interactions. Interviewees reported both successes and challenges in implementing this model within a virtual context. For many, the absence of in-person interactions posed a significant challenge, as the live-learn model relies on shared experiences beyond the classroom, such as communal meals, group worship, and informal mentorship. In response, instructors and facilitators sought creative ways to replicate aspects of the live-learn environment online.

Some instructors incorporated scheduled prayer times, virtual worship sessions, and community-building activities into their online programs. Respondents noted that these elements helped foster a sense of unity and spiritual formation, even across geographic distances. For example, one interviewee shared how a group of students connected through a prayer session that was both 'powerful and unifying,' with participants from three different continents joining together virtually. Experiences like this reinforced the potential for spiritual connection within digital spaces, affirming that the live-learn model could be adapted to online environments when guided by intentional practices.

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of frequent communication and relational support. Instructors and facilitators reported dedicating time to one-on-one virtual check-ins with students to discuss personal challenges, spiritual growth, and academic progress. These check-ins were seen as crucial to maintaining a holistic approach to education, allowing faculty to address individual student needs and reinforce the values of the live-learn model. While acknowledging the limitations of online interaction, respondents generally agreed that such practices helped bridge the relational gap inherent in distance learning.

### **Survey Results**

The survey data provided quantitative insights into users' perspectives on the effectiveness, benefits, and limitations of UofN's current hybrid learning model. The survey highlighted three major findings: satisfaction with accessibility, concerns over the limitations of virtual engagement, and the need for expanded training and support.

#### ***Accessibility and Flexibility of Hybrid Learning***

Survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the accessibility of online learning tools, particularly videoconferencing, was one of the most valued aspects of the hybrid model. Approximately 78% of respondents agreed that the flexibility of hybrid learning allowed students from various backgrounds to participate in UofN programs, reducing geographic, financial, and logistical barriers. Many respondents shared that videoconferencing tools enabled them to engage in courses they would not have been able to attend otherwise due to travel restrictions or financial constraints.

Respondents also appreciated the ability to access recorded sessions, which allowed students with varying schedules to review material at their convenience. For many working students, this flexibility was crucial, enabling them to balance academic and professional

commitments effectively. These insights reinforce the impact of the Genesis Centre's original mission of broadening access, as current students continue to benefit from a more inclusive educational approach.

### ***Limitations of Engagement and Interaction***

Despite the accessibility benefits, survey respondents expressed concerns regarding the limitations of virtual engagement. Approximately 63% of respondents noted that the quality of interaction in online sessions did not fully replicate the dynamics of in-person learning, with many observing a lack of personal connection and spontaneity in virtual classrooms. Respondents reported that it was more difficult to form meaningful connections with peers and instructors, especially in large classes where interaction often felt superficial.

Some participants highlighted that the absence of physical community was particularly challenging in a Christian educational environment. UofN's live-learn model encourages relationship-building through shared physical spaces and daily life, aspects that are harder to emulate online. Survey comments reflected a desire for more structured community-building efforts within virtual programs, such as small group discussions, mentorship pairings, and informal social hours. These suggestions align with feedback from interview participants, emphasising the need for intentional relational practices in distance learning to support the live-learn ethos.

### ***Need for Expanded Training and Technical Support***

A significant portion of respondents (around 70%) indicated that additional training and support would improve their hybrid learning experience. Many expressed that faculty and facilitators needed more comprehensive training in digital tools and virtual classroom management to enhance engagement and interactivity. Respondents noted that instructors often lacked familiarity with advanced features in videoconferencing platforms, such as breakout rooms, interactive polls, and collaborative whiteboards, which could foster a more dynamic learning experience.

Technical difficulties were also a common source of frustration, with respondents mentioning issues such as unstable internet connections, device compatibility problems, and occasional platform failures. Many students suggested that UofN provide an orientation session for new users and offer ongoing support to troubleshoot technical issues as they arise. This feedback suggests that while technology has expanded access, maximising its potential requires continued investment in both technical resources and user training.

## **Emerging Themes and Synthesis of Results**

### ***Theme 1: Bridging Physical and Virtual Community***

The theme of community emerged as a core component of both the survey and interview data, reflecting UofN's commitment to the live-learn model. The findings suggest that virtual classrooms can support community-building and spiritual connection, but only with intentional design and commitment from both students and faculty. Respondents advocated for practices that foster small-group interactions and mentorship, mirroring the structure of in-person community life. Both students and instructors expressed a desire for UofN to invest in relational aspects of virtual education, ensuring that even remote students can experience the benefits of communal learning and spiritual formation.

### ***Theme 2: Adapting Spiritual Formation to Hybrid Models***

The Genesis Centre's legacy as a platform for spiritual formation remains relevant in UofN's future hybrid models, as many respondents noted the possibility of spiritual growth through online interactions. Both qualitative and quantitative data highlighted instances where

students and instructors felt a shared sense of God's presence during virtual sessions. These experiences, while perhaps less common than in physical classrooms, demonstrated that the live-learn model's principles of discipleship and communal worship could be adapted to digital spaces. However, respondents emphasised the need for intentional practices, such as virtual worship sessions, prayer groups, and one-on-one mentorship, to ensure that hybrid learning aligns with UofN's mission of holistic, faith-centred education.

### ***Theme 3: Enhancing Faculty Support and Technical Proficiency***

Both interviews and survey responses underscored the importance of faculty development and technical support in ensuring effective hybrid learning. Instructors expressed the need for continuous training in digital tools and virtual classroom management, which would allow them to enhance interactivity and engagement in online courses. Students also highlighted the necessity of technical support for common issues like connectivity problems and platform navigation. Together, these findings indicate that UofN can improve the quality of its hybrid learning by investing in both staff development and technological infrastructure.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study offer valuable insights for UofN and other Christian institutions seeking to balance the benefits of hybrid learning with the irreplaceable qualities of in-person education. The Genesis Centre's experience highlights the potential for digital tools to extend UofN's mission, broadening access to its programs and reducing barriers for students around the world. The data indicates that while videoconferencing and online platforms have enhanced accessibility, these tools must be applied thoughtfully to support UofN's holistic, relationship-centered educational approach.

The primary implication of this study is the need for UofN to ensure that its use of technology aligns with the live-learn model's community and discipleship values. The live-learn model, which is foundational to UofN's identity, promotes formation through shared experiences and daily life interactions. The experience of the Genesis Centre demonstrates that spiritual formation, often viewed as inseparable from physical community, can indeed be cultivated in distance settings when guided by intentional practices. For UofN, this finding affirms the live-learn model's adaptability to hybrid learning formats. To sustain this model, UofN should continue investing in training for faculty and staff, equipping them with tools and strategies to facilitate interactive, community-based learning experiences in digital environments.

### **Recommendations for Enhancing Hybrid Learning**

#### ***Maintain In-Person Learning for the Core DTS programme***

Based on the study's findings and feedback from participants, it is recommended that UofN preserve the in-person format for its Discipleship Training School (DTS) program. The DTS is central to UofN's mission, serving as an immersive experience where students engage in community life, mentorship, and spiritual growth in a highly relational setting. Participants highlighted that the in-person DTS fosters relationships and hands-on discipleship experiences that are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate online. By retaining the in-person format for DTS, UofN can ensure that this core program continues to offer the transformative, community-based formation it is known for.

#### ***Develop Training for Faculty on Virtual Engagement***

The study revealed that faculty members would benefit from ongoing training in digital pedagogy and virtual engagement techniques. By equipping instructors with skills in managing interactive online sessions, using breakout rooms effectively, and facilitating spiritual



formation in digital spaces, UofN can improve the quality of its online courses and help maintain the relational aspects of its programs.

### ***Adopt Flexible Models to Support Community and Accessibility***

The implementation of a HyFlex model, which allows students to choose between in-person and online participation, could provide UofN with a balanced approach to hybrid learning. In programs where both in-person and virtual formats are feasible, this model would allow students to select their preferred mode of participation, accommodating those who face family, visa, geographic or financial barriers while ensuring that students who can attend in person benefit from the live-learn experience.

### ***Enhance Digital Tools and Technical Support***

To address technical challenges, UofN should invest in its technological infrastructure and provide students and faculty with effective training and technical support (even by virtual means). The study indicated that connectivity issues, unfamiliarity with digital platforms, and device compatibility problems hindered the learning experience for some participants. A robust technical support system and thorough orientation for online students would help alleviate these challenges and improve user experience.

### ***Create Virtual Community-Building Practices***

As UofN expands its hybrid offerings, intentional community-building practices should be integrated into virtual classrooms. These might include virtual prayer groups, mentorship pairings, and informal online gatherings, which can help foster relational connections even at a distance. By designing programs that encourage spiritual and relational growth, UofN can help remote students experience aspects of the live-learn model, even when they are unable to attend in person.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen many changes in the education sphere in the past 60 years. Times and generations change. Cultures and learning styles change. The Bible remains our foundation in the UofN and YWAM, but the way we ‘read’ and study can and will change.

The Genesis Centre’s legacy at UofN exemplifies the power of distance learning within a Christian context, demonstrating that, when applied with purpose, technology can extend educational access and foster spiritual connection. As UofN continues to expand its hybrid offerings, the institution must remain committed to the principles of its live-learn model, using digital tools not as substitutes but as complements to in-person education.

The Discipleship Training School (DTS), as a cornerstone of UofN’s mission, should remain an in-person program, reflecting the institution’s commitment to community-driven, experiential learning. This recommendation is based on the study’s findings that spiritual formation and discipleship, which are central to DTS, benefit significantly from the immersive, face-to-face setting that allows for organic relationships and mentorship. This can also lay a foundation for continued training by hybrid learning models.

By preserving the in-person format for programs like DTS and thoughtfully integrating hybrid models for other courses, UofN can honour both its historical roots and its commitment to making Christian education accessible globally. The insights from this study provide a framework for UofN’s future, supporting a balanced approach that embraces the benefits of technology while maintaining the transformative power of in-person, community-centred education.

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