

A JOINT VENTURE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM BETWEEN HONG KONG AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract: This article examines how the use of information technology overcomes some of the difficulties in delivering vocational education at a distance. It then discusses how the collaboration of an overseas institution with a local academic partner can offer an enhanced distance education program. In addition to the reflections of the academic and administrative staff, feedback from the students is collected through a questionnaire survey. The students' general course satisfaction and their opinions to the enhanced form of distance education are investigated. The findings of this case study provide a useful reference for distance education providers to enhance their competitiveness when operating in other countries.

INTRODUCTION

In the information era, there is little limit for an institution to extend its delivery of education from its campus to other places and from its home country to other countries. Distance learning is seen as a solution to provide education and training at a lower cost and with higher flexibility. A common and important question about distance learning concerns its effectiveness when compared with conventional face-to-face teaching. There is no definitive answer to this difficult but important question. We are lacking a universally agreed definition of learning effectiveness as well as being influenced by many confounding factors such as the nature of the course and the cultural background of the learners.

This article does not attempt to answer the above question. Rather, it takes an empirical approach by examining a case study of how distance learning can be enhanced by appropriate combination with face-to-face teaching in a cost-effective manner. In Belanger and Jordan (2000), distance learning is not seen as an all-or-nothing experience. In reality, it is not necessary to assume distance learning must wholly substitute the conventional face-to-face teaching. In a *combined delivery*, part of a course can be delivered via the traditional classroom environment and the other part via distance learning. When an institution provides a distance learning course overseas using the combined delivery mode, it can collaborate with an academic partner at the receiving end so as to keep the cost of the face-to-face teaching component reasonably affordable.

Charles Sturt University (CSU), Australia offers a Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Information Technology) in Hong Kong in collaboration with the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of the University of Hong Kong using the combined delivery mode. In the following sections, we first describe how this course is offered in distance learning mode in Australia and how it is enhanced when transported into Hong Kong. We then discuss the benefits of using two teaching modes together in a course. We follow to report on the feedback of the students and their opinions towards the preferred learning mode. Lastly, we summarize the findings and arguments of the paper in the conclusion section.

THE JOINT VENTURE

Charles Sturt University was established in 1989 by the amalgamation of a number of institutions of higher education. It has a proud record of higher education in Australia spanning more than 100 years and a long tradition of offering education to international students. Distance education is a particular strength and focus at CSU and has opened up opportunities for study by distance learning, for the adult and part time students especially. There are over 28,000 students enrolled in over 150 courses with more than 2,500 different subjects.

The School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of the University of Hong Kong is the extension arm of the University. Its role is to provide access to career training and education opportunities for the community. In 1999, a course enrolment of over 80,000 was recorded. SPACE offers a number of award-bearing courses in collaboration with overseas universities. In some cases, these courses are in areas that have very strong demand, for example, information technology. In other cases, the courses are in specialized areas that are not formally available in local tertiary institutions, for example, library and information science (Mills and Chan, 1999).

In 1993, the two institutions jointly offered the CSU Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Information Technology) in Hong Kong. Some people may doubt whether the quality of a distance learning course can be maintained when it is operated in another country with a different culture. The following features are believed to have ensured the academic quality of the course offered in Hong Kong and may even have enhanced the course quality.

DISTANCE LEARNING MATERIAL IS PORTABLE

The fact that distance education material can be physically transported to other places is partly a guarantee of academic quality even though the course is offered overseas. In Australia, students can only study the course in distance learning mode. They only go to the CSU campus for a three-day study school at the beginning of the course and these days, this has even been made optional. They continue their study off campus, based on the study packages supplied by CSU. Assignments are submitted and sent back mainly by mail.

When Hong Kong students take the CSU distance learning subjects, they receive the same study packages. CSU staff visit Hong Kong at least once a year to conduct orientation and the introductory study school. The Hong Kong students enjoy no less teaching support than their counterparts in Australia, despite the fact that they are overseas students. In practice however, the slightly longer mail delivery time for submission and returning of assignments can sometimes be a bit of concern.

TECHNOLOGY ENHANCEMENT

The advancement in technology, especially the telecommunication technology, helps to reduce the barrier of distance. One of the strengths of the Graduate Diploma in Applied Science when it was first introduced in Australia in 1985, was the insistence that all students have access to the necessary Information Communications Technology (ICT) to regularly connect to CSU. These days, students can easily communicate with CSU and the teaching faculty through the Internet, email and various other ICT tools such as discussion forums that have been provided. The electronic communication has obvious advantages over the conventional mail, the facsimile and the phone. In addition to the University homepage, an online subject homepage with a teaching forum is organized for each of the subjects. Teachers can place announcements, news, comments related to the subject as well as

provide assessment feedback through the subject homepage. They can take part in discussions with the students and answer their questions in the teaching forum. Every student, no matter where they live, can access the information and participate in the discussion. Students now have an efficient channel to interact with their fellow students which was difficult, if not impossible, to have in the past. Within cyberspace, it does not make much difference whether students are in Hong Kong or in Australia.

FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

In Hong Kong, the program is operated in an enhanced mode. Two of the subjects are taught entirely by face-to-face teaching. We believe that for certain skills and practically oriented subjects, face-to-face lectures and workshops are often more efficient than distance learning. For the other distance learning subjects, students receive face-to-face tutorial support of around 16 hours per subject. When students can read announcements posted by the CSU academic staff, communicate with them using email, and participate in the teaching forum discussions, why do we still organize tutorial meetings?

Of course, there are many constraints and overheads in attending face-to-face meetings, such as scheduling the time and travelling to the meeting place. Distance learning is supposed to eliminate these problems. There is also some doubt whether these meetings are cost effective and whether such arrangements deter independent learning that is required in distance education. The same can be said of many face-to-face teaching strategies.

In Hong Kong, the overhead in travelling for attending meetings is far less a concern than in Australia. There is however, the added problem of learning content written in English when this is not the native language of the learner. We believe that local tutors are able to elaborate on the distance learning study materials and make it easier for the students to interpret the knowledge and apply it to their actual working environment within their local context. Wherever appropriate and necessary, study materials can be enhanced and supplemented with lectures such as the handling of information in Chinese.

The tutorial meetings also provide an opportunity for the students to have peer discussion on their learning outcomes and difficulties. The sharing of working and study experiences among themselves is also a valuable part of the learning process. The psychological and mutual support generated by the peer group cannot be neglected. Hong Kong is rather famous in its fast pace and busy working environment. It is quite easy for the students to fall behind the study schedule if they are studying alone. It does not mean that they are not capable of studying independently, but it is very difficult for them to maintain a regular study schedule when faced with all sorts of pressures for time. The scheduled tutorial meetings provide students with an effective mechanism to set checkpoints and to regulate the study plan.

We have sought the views of the students by conducting a questionnaire survey in March 2000. A majority of the students responded that they preferred the combined distance learning and face-to-face delivery mode over the purely distance learning or the purely face-to-face teaching mode. The result indicates that a compromise between the two pure forms of teaching modes gives students the benefits of both worlds. This point is elaborated upon below.

OTHER ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Through SPACE, students have access to the libraries and computer facilities of the University of

Hong Kong. SPACE has well equipped classrooms and computer laboratories in a number of conveniently located learning centres. When the students have study or personal problems, it is easier for them to get assistance from the local tutors and administrators that they are more familiar with. This provides convenient access to solve many of the simple problems, quickly and efficiently.

TEACHING MODES

Distance education is increasingly being seen as a more economic education delivery proposition. But market acceptance and resistance is yet to be tested and may not necessarily be the same over all subjects and in all courses. Cultural factors must also play an important part (Robinson 1998). The Asian students are perceived to be reluctant to become active learners. Can the increasing use of technology in course delivery, in communication between teacher and student, alter the traditional role of the teacher and student in Asia?

In countries like Australia, given the choice between attending face-to-face classes and studying at home, many students choose the latter. Can this experience be transferred into the Asian context? From the following comment by Cheng (1998), regarding students in Asian culture, it is uncertain whether Hong Kong students prefer to study at home and communicate electronically with their teachers.

Students in Asian culture are also not used to expressing themselves and exchanging views. They are more used to listening, keeping analyses in their minds, and express themselves only when it is very necessary. As such it remains to be seen whether the extension of the physical classroom to the cyberspace would further discourage or encourage interaction among students. (p. 8)

In our questionnaire survey carried out in March 2000 with the graduate diploma students, we asked them to select which teaching mode they preferred most. Two thirds out of the twenty one respondents prefer the existing arrangement, that is, some face-to-face taught subjects and some distance learning subjects with supporting tutorials. For the other respondents, five (24%) preferred all the subjects to be this hybrid of distance learning with tutorials. Two (9%) preferred face-to-face teaching for all the subjects. No one preferred the pure distance learning mode. This finding is encouraging support of our belief that the combined delivery provides Hong Kong students with the benefits of both worlds.

The distance learning has certain economies and conveniences. It also comes from an overseas university that delivers academic quality. By teaching a small number of subjects in face-to-face mode and providing tutorials in others, gives students personal contact with the teachers and fellow students. The academic and psychological support is valuable to their learning process. Perhaps we should not move too quickly towards a situation of less personalized teaching or total reliance on electronic access where the teachers and students increasingly become remote and impersonal, unknown to each other.

STUDENT BENEFITS

It could not be a complete success if the joint venture does not benefit the students. There is no doubt that the students are attending a course they need, otherwise they simply would not enroll. While they study for an Australian degree accredited by the relevant professional body without leaving Hong

Kong, they have enhanced, instead of restricted, support when compared with the fellow students in Australia. The overall tuition fee and the related expenses for studying in Hong Kong is much less than studying aboard in Australia as there is no boarding and travelling expenses. Since students can continue with their existing employment, the saving in opportunity cost is quite significant. Through the collaboration of the overseas and local institutions, the tuition fee for the enhanced combined delivery is comparable to the fee of pure distance learning.

But do the students find the course of high quality? Do they have problems in taking a distance education course offered by an overseas University? From the questionnaire survey, it was found that the students are satisfied with the distance education study packages, the assessment, the tutorial support, and the face-to-face teaching. In the written comment section of the questionnaire, the most mentioned issue was a simple logistical one, the need to organize the meeting venue at a conveniently accessible place. Some mentioned that even for the face-to-face subjects, a detailed study guide such as in the distance materials should also be provided. The fact that the distance learning subjects are offered by CSU at a distance does not appear to be a problem at all.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the delivery of a distance education course from an Australian university in Hong Kong in collaboration with a continuing education unit of a local university. The trend towards globalization happens in education as in other business areas. The computing and telecommunication technologies narrow the gap between the distance education provider and students, making distance education more effective. Nevertheless, some personalized contact between the teachers and students and among the students is still valuable and should be maintained. This is especially appropriate for places like Hong Kong, taking into consideration its geographic convenience and the cultural background of the students.

The overseas and local partners complement each other and provide an enhanced, combined delivery course in a cost-effective manner. Students enjoy the benefits of both distance education and face-to-face teaching. They do not need to go abroad but are able study for an Australian University award. At the same time, they received valuable teaching and tutorial support.

This example reflects the dynamic, flexible, and cost effective nature of developing continuing and professional education. The findings of this case study provide a useful reference for distance education providers to enhance their competitiveness when proposing to operate in other countries. On the other hand, it also reveals how a place can meet education and training needs through cooperation with overseas institutions. The key factor to its success is through international collaboration. The synergistic effect of the collaboration creates a win-win situation for the two institutions and the students. It is believed that the quality and effectiveness of distance education can be improved. The students, of course, become the primary beneficiaries.

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