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UP THE e-LEARNING CURVE: ENSURING QUALITY ONLINE EDUCATION WITHIN AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract
The paper describes the implementation of a project within Australian Catholic University designed to launch the Faculties into online education in a manner which ensured quality in all aspects of the teaching-learning experiences of academics and students. Key elements of the strategic approach adopted by the project leaders, including the involvement of a specialist commercial provider of web-based delivery systems as a partner in the project, mechanisms to support the initiative through the first stages, careful choice of the programs offered online, and staff development matched to the emerging needs of those involved in the teaching of courses, are described. Challenges encountered in the implementation process, and the factors which assisted in overcoming these problems are identified.

The paper draws upon this experience to raise some important issues relevant to the successful introduction of online education as an integral component of the teaching repertoire of Faculties.
THE CONTEXT

Australia’s Higher Education sector has been facing the challenge of implementing on-line education in a wholesale fashion since the mid-1990s. At the vanguard of this change were universities which specialized in distance education programs and began using technology-mediated programs as their traditional print based modes of delivery were converted to electronically transmitted courses. However, for the majority of institutions, many of which are still in the developmental phase of online service delivery, the implementation of online education has involved a mosaic of methods, with a variety of internal structures to support the delivery of programs.

Needless to say, the take-up of technology for teaching and learning has produced something of a revolution in universities, not only in managing technological and pedagogical change, but also, and perhaps less well acknowledged, in managing organisational and cultural change. The ways in which individual institutions respond to these changes are many and varied, dependent upon factors such as existing technological infrastructure, competencies and enthusiasms of staff, institutional support and so on. The following paper presents an overview of how the move to web-based teaching and learning was implemented at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), unique among Australian universities for the widely dispersed campus configuration, located in cities across the Eastern States and Territory of Australia, representing a geographic spread of 2,500 kilometres.

At this time, the University had developed reasonable internal electronic communications networks, of which email, video and teleconferencing were the key elements. Some attempts by individuals and pilot projects to develop web-based teaching had shown that the University did not yet have the capacity to deliver online education in a systematic and reliable way using internal resources. Nonetheless, there was a growing number of innovative staff who were keen to implement online education approaches. The issue for...
the institution was how to proceed in a manner which would ensure that a reliable and high quality process of course delivery could be implemented, using limited resources.

For this project, the University decided not to provide the technical infrastructure from within, but instead to enter into a partnership with an external education provider, NextEd Pty Ltd, an Australian-based company with extensive international networks including South East Asia and China. The perceived benefits for ACU in partnering with NextEd were the high level of technical support (including 24hrs x 7day helpdesk), a global server network system, a sophisticated web-based learning management and student administrative system, and availability of technical expertise relevant to education.

Some of the main considerations for ACU in moving forward with on-line education, were generic across the higher education sector. The emergence of the global lifelong learning economy has required universities to respond in innovative and flexible ways to increasingly niche interests and demands of students. Positioning ACU in this changing and increasingly competitive environment, so as to be responsive to rapid developments in the use of online modes in teaching and learning, was therefore a principal consideration.

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1 NextEd provides web development, a learning management system using customised Blackboard platform, technical and educational expertise, and some marketing of courses.
AIMS OF THE INNOVATION

The primary aim of the innovation was to offer high-quality on-line courses to postgraduate students seeking professional development through a reliable and student-friendly mode of study which could meet their needs for off-campus distance education in their own time and location.

Associated aims of the ACUweb Project were:

- To develop the skills of lecturers many of whom had little prior experience of online teaching methods;
- To evaluate the effectiveness of online modes of teaching-learning particularly in relation to the potential clientele, who were mainly professionals with significant prior qualifications;
- To test the potential market for ACU postgraduate courses for new streams of students;
- To explore possibilities for more cost-efficient delivery of courses across the multiple campuses of the University.

INCEPTION OF THE INNOVATION

The ACUweb Project involved the offering of a selected range of Masters and Graduate Certificate courses from all three Faculties (Education, Arts and Sciences, and Health Sciences). Courses were offered in the areas of Education, Theology, Management, Nursing and Religious Education.

The innovation required a major commitment by the University including financial support for course development, staff development and internal co-ordination. The adoption of the innovation was assisted by leadership and support from the Vice-Chancellor and senior officers. A small ACUweb project team was established by the University to manage and oversee the project.
NextEd assigned a project officer to work closely with the ACUweb staff in creating the portfolio of courses to be located on the NextEd servers using the NextEd Learning Platform.

In the initial round, a selected number of course units (20) was chosen from Masters-level courses with particular relevance to continuing education for professionals. Individual staff with academic expertise in on-campus teaching of these units were nominated by the Faculty Deans to teach the first online programs in First Semester 2000.

Intensive staff development workshops were organised with combined input from ACU and NextEd specialists in curriculum design, teaching and technical aspects of online delivery. The workshops were followed up with additional assistance as lecturers developed their teaching materials, structured the content and prepared the myriad of library and other resources required for the online mode of teaching.

The ACUweb site was developed and registered, and promotional efforts made in preparation for launching the initiative. NextEd assisted the promotional process by paying the fees for students in the first semester of enrolments, an initiative which was successful in attracting a substantial initial cohort of students - most of whom had not engaged in online learning modes previously.

**IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES**

*Change is endemic to the information technology environment. IT planners barely have time to come to terms with one new paradigm before the next one arrives. Each brings new opportunities, but also new challenges as well.*

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The rapid change that technology brings is contrasted by the traditional inertia of long-established institutions, reflected in the cliché that “trying to change a university is like trying to move a graveyard – it is extremely complex and you don’t get much internal support.” Fortunately, ACU is a relatively new institution, with a degree of flexibility and willingness to adapt which differs from the traditional stereotype depicted here. Nevertheless, the challenges of introducing such a novel mode of teaching-learning into the university proved to be considerable.

These challenges may be categorised as follows:

**New Skills Required for Course Design, and Teaching**

In a context where very few Faculty staff members had prior experience of online education, a critical aspect of the innovation was that of providing sufficient technical and curriculum design skills in the online milieu, to enable key academic staff to adapt their course units to the online mode. The provision of intensive workshops led by ACUweb and NextEd personnel with suitable expertise, proved to be essential to the implementation process. The demands made of lecturing staff were multiple and complex, both in the development phase and the subsequent teaching phase. Ongoing support for these lecturers was an essential element in assisting them to implement the program effectively.

**Student Familiarisation and Learning Skills**

An issue which is still a notable one for online education generally is how to clarify for students the processes of online study, and to deal with the many technical issues they may encounter. Students come to courses with a range of expectations and competencies, both technical and academic. Thrown into this mix are the variables which technology produces – individual student’s hardware and software systems, their connectivity, their ISPs as well as the ‘hiccups’ which occur in most university and technical systems.

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Most students enrolling in the units through ACUweb for the first time had limited experience of online study modes. These students faced a range of challenges, learning how to enrol online, following the guidelines and then engaging in the communication and learning activities. Surprisingly, most students tackled the challenges with confidence and patience, adapting readily to the interactive elements of the process. Indeed, the responses of the students in the main were positive from the outset. The availability of the 24-hour helpdesk, and follow-up by ACUweb personnel proved to be extremely important and was acknowledged by students as an important factor in their success. A second factor was the willingness of most of the lecturers to encourage students and to participate in the communication processes, both asynchronous and synchronous, thus generating much interactivity in the learning process.

**Adapting University Administrative and Support Mechanisms**

In the dynamic and constantly evolving arena of online education, and in such a new field, there has been no blueprint of procedures and policies for the implementation of online educational services. So while careful planning may reduce the risk of undesirable outcomes, it is no guarantee that implementation will be plain sailing. For ACU, a factor which had not been anticipated, was the difficulty in feeding the student registration and administration details entered into the ACUweb site when students applied and enrolled on-line, to ACU’s student administrative software system. This problem caused a good deal of difficulty for both students and staff, and was not resolved to everyone’s satisfaction in the first two semesters.

Another area of challenge was that of provision of electronic library resources. Initially, there was a tendency for staff to send hardcopy reading materials to students by post. This proved costly and slow, particularly where students were in remote areas or in other countries. The challenge was largely met through the efforts of the ACU Library staff who rapidly developed a comprehensive virtual library of electronic-based resources. More recently,
electronic copyright agreements have placed further challenges on the access by students to such resources through the outsource partner's servers. Overall, it can be said that the move to electronic sources for studies has proved to be highly effective.

Experience with these aspects demonstrated that the introduction of online modes of teaching placed significant demands on the administrative and support systems of the University, which were not fully provided for in the pre-planning phase.

**Outsourcing the Technical Support Services**
The processes involved in setting up and running the ACUweb Project in collaboration with NextEd as the external provider of technical infrastructure raised many practical issues for both parties. Solution of the myriad of problems which emerged in the development phase required very close professional collaboration, with a high degree of mutual trust and shared understanding. Both partners recognised the importance of working together as a team, and the role of the staff at the interface proved to be crucial. In this case, the quality of the co-operation was excellent, with staff from both organisations working together to resolve emerging issues in creative fashion. This process was complemented by meetings held between senior representatives of both partners, mainly to establish key policies and procedures, and to adapt approaches in the light of experience.

**Communication about the Innovation**
Given the range of practical adaptations and new skills required for online education, it was critical to the project's success that the University staff involved (and even those not directly involved) had accurate and up-to-date information about the aims, structure and progress of the project. This has proven to be one of the biggest challenges for the project team, particularly in an environment where there was so little known about the technical, curricular or administrative requirements in the first instance. In retrospect, it can be seen that the communication processes were somewhat limited, largely being focussed on the lecturers who were directly involved in the implementation of
the project. The initial perceptions of administrative and other service units were that the project was totally separate from the main business of the University, with the outsource partner NextEd being responsible for all aspects of the delivery of the courses. When this proved not to be accurate, the responses from such personnel varied across a range from active disinterest to positive adaptation.

The lecturers involved in the project were based on various campuses, geographically dispersed, and it was difficult to maintain the network support and communication even within that group. At the same time, those many staff not involved in the project at that point viewed the innovation with the normal range of preconceptions that might be anticipated from academics and others who have spent most of their energies in face-to-face teaching contexts.

These difficulties were met by organising special information workshops on several campuses, at which interested personnel were given some understandings of the project, of the purpose of the partnership with NextEd, the respective roles of the two partners, and characteristics of the learning platform. Occasional newsletters and more frequent email communications also assisted. These strategies had a reasonable degree of success, however, there remained a significant amount of ignorance and sometimes wrong perceptions about the project throughout the first two years.

The above challenges taken together could well have derailed the project, leading to individual and Faculty resistance. Indeed, the level of enthusiasm for the project varied within and across Faculties and around the institution as a whole. Such 'resistance to change' is often presented as a psychological barrier, but in reality is more likely to represent the normal reaction of the organisation to the complexities involved in an innovation of this kind. The relative success of the project to date owes much to the commitment of all those engaged in the implementation process and to the willingness of the management of the University to adapt strategies to the emerging needs of the innovation.
OUTCOMES OF PROJECT

ACUweb has been operational now for a period of two years. The University has achieved a significant new profile in online education with a suite of 14 postgraduate courses available in fully online mode, including a range of 74 course units for students to make their selection. On the basis of formal survey data, student feedback has been highly positive about their online learning experiences. For example, in response to one item, 85% of students surveyed in First Semester 2001 indicated that they would recommend others to undertake the unit they had completed through ACUweb. A substantial body of evidence suggests that the more interactive the instruction, the more effective the learning outcome is likely to be. This finding was supported by the ACUweb survey, which indicated that the greater the use of the interactive functions of the learning system, such as email, discussion boards and chat, the greater the level of student satisfaction. Conversely, student satisfaction was lowest in those small number of instances where the lecturer did not make adequate use of the interactivity available on the learning system.

A very positive outcome from a staff development point of view, has been the acquisition of online education skills amongst a key cohort of academic staff in each Faculty, 85 altogether. This represents a significant proportion of the total academic staff of the Faculties, particularly those who have responsibility for graduate level courses. There is a need for ongoing training of such staff and some have elected to attend additional workshops to refresh their skills.

Another indicator of success has been steadily increasing student numbers, mainly Australia-based, but with signs of growth in international enrolments. Approximately 45% of students choose to undertake their studies in mixed mode, that is, by studying some of their units through attendance on campus.

There is a growing use of the online education mode for those postgraduate units which had previously been offered on multiple campuses, often to very small class groups.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of the project was the impetus to improve the access by students to library resources through electronic modes. In addition, the University has given high priority to enabling students (and staff) to have access through the web to a whole range of University services. The benefits of such initiatives will be available to all students and staff, not simply those engaged in online learning.

In short, the project has achieved its primary aim for the Faculties of offering high quality courses to postgraduate students through an effective and reliable online education mode.

**EMERGING ISSUES**

There are several issues which the implementation process has revealed as important in the next stage. These may be summarised briefly as follows

- **Ensuring the evenness of quality among the courses and units offered on ACUweb.** It is apparent that the skills of the lecturers in using online teaching-learning modes are variable, and it is important to encourage some of the less experienced staff to improve their techniques. This requires a commitment to continual staff development, offering a different type of support than used in the initial stages of the project. The university is reviewing the possibilities here.

- **Increasing the flexibility of course offerings.** Initially, the online offerings have been deliberately constrained to two semesters annually, in parallel with on-campus teaching schedules. There is demand from students for greater access through a third semester or even a fourth semester for online studies. In addition, a significant number of students
would like to take their studies in a variety of modes including on campus attendance. We are currently running a trial third semester, over the summer break (now) offering one Theology unit. The response to this has been very encouraging.

- **Aligning the administrative services to the needs of online students.** The student administrative systems have been designed for traditional on-campus student enrolments. More work will be required to ensure a seamless approach to the enrolment and progression of students using online modes.

- **Marketing Courses to International Clientele.** Despite efforts by NextEd’s marketing division and the University, there has been a lower-than-expected take-up of enrolments among international students. This may partly reflect an Australian centred approach to postgraduate courses by the University. However, more needs to be done to bring the ACUweb site and its range of course offerings to the attention of potential clientele in other countries. The limited experience with such students suggests a high level of satisfaction among those who do enrol, which augurs well for the growth of student enrolments.

**Concluding Comments**

Online modes of teaching-learning are here to stay. Web-based delivery of courses will become the dominant mode of distance education in an increasingly interconnected world, in which the internet is expanded through wideband communication networks around the globe. This case study demonstrates one way in which a university in which the dominant mode of teaching has been that of face-to-face classroom and lecture hall can prepare itself for the emerging world of online education. This project has shown that it is practicable for academic lecturing staff with traditional teaching skills and limited technical know-how to adapt to the new world of the internet, while preserving the essence of high quality teaching-learning.

This case study underlines the importance of three key elements for successful implementation of high quality online education. These are clarity
of goals backed by provision of institutional support, staff development strategies to ensure adequacy of online teaching skills, and reliability of technical infrastructure and services.