Moving an Australian Dual Mode University to the Online Environment: A Case Study

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Abstract: This paper discusses an educational initiative, USQ*Online* which has enabled the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia, to deliver multiple courses via the Internet to students worldwide. The paper briefly outlines the underlying structure and philosophy of distance education at USQ and then describes how the online initiative has evolved from this existing distance education infrastructure. The paper reflects on the conceptualisation and initiation of the USQ*Online* project and the consequences of an apparent shift in the pattern of teaching and learning in a higher education institution following the introduction of online teaching. An interim evaluation conducted by the authors makes the following recommendations: open communication, consultation and collaboration should form the basis of such a major institutional initiative; roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders should be clearly defined; synergies and alliances with strong partners are essential; and there should be sound technological support at all levels.

Background

In recent years, higher education worldwide has been faced with significant change which has been in response to a number of influences (Armstrong et al., 1997, Askew & Carnell, 1998). These influences have been the greater emphasis on lifelong learning and the advent of the Information Age, resulting in globalisation and a move to a knowledge society. Also, economic rationalism has required universities to enter the commercial arena (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Dearing, 1997). Student cohorts have also made further demands on universities for greater flexibility in the ways they are able to access programs and services. The adoption of flexible learning methodology has been a key initiative in many institutions in an attempt to adapt to this changing environment. In addition, information and communication technologies have created new educational opportunities and challenges, which impact upon distance education models and theory and challenge the traditional roles of teachers and learners. The paper will now examine the impact of these changes within the context of an Australian institution of higher education.

USQ is an internationally recognised leader in the provision of flexible learning opportunities and has a well-established Distance Education Centre. In 1999, the Executive Committee of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), based in Oslo, Norway, awarded its inaugural Prize of Excellence to USQ in recognition of the University's significant contribution to providing global education. In 1967, USQ was first established as a face-to-face Institute of Advanced Education, moving to full university status in 1992. In 1977, it presented itself as a viable alternative to traditional universities by offering distance education. Distance education has been defined according to several characteristics: separation of teacher and learner; the existence and influence of an educational institution; use of various media; provision of two-way communication; and an absence of group learning with the focus on independent learning (Keegan, 1986; Rumble, 1986). In Australia, a typical distance

education learning package consists of print-based materials supported by audio, video and computer-based resources and is designed to enable learners to interact independently with the materials.

USQ delivered distance education while continuing with classroom-based teaching, earning it a 'dual mode' label. This experience in dual mode delivery has strategically positioned USQ to take advantage of possibilities created by the advent of information and communication technologies and the move to online delivery. The university services over 14,000 distance students from every state in Australia, and many overseas countries. It also provides on-campus, face-to-face delivery for 5,000 Australian and international students. USQ is a regional university with an international mission. Almost seventy-five percent of the students studying with USQ are off-campus and more students study offshore through flexible learning modes at USQ than with any other Australian university. Providing learning experiences at a distance using an electronic delivery mechanism presents further challenges but also opens up a whole new world of opportunities and possibilities. For one, the approach questions the traditional definition of distance education as having an independent learning focus and lacking in group interaction.

USQ delivered its first course solely online in 1997. In 1999, a major online initiative called USQ*Online* (http://www.usqonline.com.au) was introduced. This initiative enables the delivery of multiple courses via the Internet to students worldwide. USQ*Online* presently offers 29 award courses and has involved all six Faculties within the university and approximately one quarter of the 400 academic staff. It involves a contractual arrangement with an independent commercial provider, a company in which USQ is a shareholder. Aiming at a mass global market, it provides a complete delivery package - the administrative structures (including enrolment), delivery platform, and mirror sites around Australia, Asia and North America.

Change in Higher Education

The introduction of the online initiative has caused major cultural and administrative change within USQ. The institution has responded to the current influences and demands and has made some substantial changes to the way it offers its programs and services. Many of the institutional systems have had to undergo major reform and the pedagogical framework of "traditional" distance education has been challenged by the unique possibilities of online delivery. There has also been quite significant organisational restructuring to enable the implementation of a more corporate approach to management at the University. Teaching online has had an enormous impact on academic staff roles and workloads, and on the conceptualisation of models of online teaching and learning.

The literature supports the belief that the most critical barriers to change in educational processes are "personal" ones. Kefford (1980) maintain that the most decisive factor in ensuring the success of change in educational organisations is the positive reaction and commitment of the personnel affected by that change. According to Waugh and Punch (1987), there are basic generalisations common to all educational change and these can be incorporated into ideal-type models for implementing change. Waugh and Punch have extracted general variables that should be included in such models, identifying the variables as:

- overall feelings and attitudes towards the previous system, particularly so with regard to teachers who have been in the system for a long period of time. They may not be receptive to change that challenges their traditional values and those of the organisation and previous system;
- the extent of alleviation of fears and uncertainties associated with the change. The lack of knowledge about the proposed change may hinder receptivity to that change and teachers should be encouraged to be actively involved in the decision making process;
- the practicality and importance of the new education system; and
- the personal cost appraisal for the change. Teachers will tend to appraise the value of the proposed change in terms of the amount of incentive and support received to implement change; the amount of energy, time and difficulty involved in having to learn new skills; and the effects on students, on home life, and on personal satisfaction.

Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) observe, "universities more so than most organisations are built on a culture of individualism and academic personal autonomy" (p. 1). The roles of staff and students in the traditional tertiary education framework have been established over hundreds of years. The traditional academic culture has been labelled a "person" culture by Handy (1993, in Laurillard & Margetson 1997), with an emphasis on individualism for both staff and learners. In this culture, academics work autonomously on the preparation of face-to-face teaching

materials. It is very much an individual task, with the control of content an individual responsibility. The Distance Education Centre at USQ was established to facilitate design, production and delivery of material for students separated from a tertiary institution by distance, creating what Laurillard & Margetson (1997, p. 3) call a "role culture" or industrial model of education. The introduction of distance education caused considerable tension between the "person" culture and the emerging "role" culture. The role culture of traditional distance delivery means that course material is delivered in print, is therefore available for peer scrutiny and usually prepared in a team environment. The team approach is deemed essential because there is no one person who can design and deliver the teaching/learning programs that are epitomised by distance education, suggesting that perhaps "educators…must…drop the arrogance of academic isolation" (Limerick et al. 1998, p.11) within this culture.

The Study

In order to reflect on the initiation and conceptualisation of the USQ*Online* project within the context of organisational change, the authors conducted an interim evaluation with a representative group of academic staff at the university. This was a preliminary investigation and the authors are not suggesting that the initiative has only affected academic staff. Through an analysis of data collected from interviews, the authors were able to reflect on the staff perceptions of the online initiative. The interviews were conducted over a one week period with staff from a cross-section of Faculties and levels. This was to gain a snapshot view of the perceptions of the initiative, its conceptualisation, initiation and its communication to the university community. The interviewees were sent the questions (see appendix 1, Interview Questions) prior to the interview to allow time for consideration. The structure of the interview was followed closely to give consistency in the data collection, although the opportunity for extended exploration of the themes and more free-ranging discussion was available within the interview context. As a result of analysis of the interview data, the paper identifies key challenges and experiences that have emerged and offers proposals from which others interested in institutional change and transformation might benefit.

Findings and Recommendations

Communication, Consultation and Collaboration

According to the interview data, there was a concerted attempt to inform and consult with staff about the online initiative in a structured way through a variety of channels. Communication occurred via written means and verbal presentations such as university-wide assemblies (including the "launch"), demonstrations, meetings within Faculties, focus groups, and through small committees (see appendix 2 for a diagram of the USQ*Online* management structure). Throughout the interviews, a persistent recommendation was the need for open and ongoing communication involving all stakeholders during the process of conceptualising and communicating of such a major initiative. Interviewees articulated that lack of consultation and free exchange of information can cause feelings of disempowerment and stressed that the implementation process, and the following impact at grassroots level needs to be made very explicit. One recommendation was that an outside consultant could facilitate focus group processes to ensure a professional, unbiased approach with a free and fair exchange of information. It was also articulated that academics have much to offer in the way of educational and management expertise, and that they should contribute to both the conceptualisation and implementation of such an initiative. A consensus of opinion from the interview data indicated a need for shared "vision" and consultation and collaboration at all stages of the developmental process in order to facilitate shared meaning and a sense of ownership of the decision-making process amongst those who have to implement the project.

The literature supports the findings of the interim evaluation. Dolence and Norris (1995) observe: "Campus leadership must find ways to stimulate discussion, debate, and dialogue on the need for a transformation vision. Existing processes and/or initiatives can be reshaped as agents of transformation. Given the ethos of Academe, the development of shared values must be a process of co-creation, consultation and testing of ideas" *(*pp. 87-8). This supports one of the main variables discussed by Waugh and Punch (1987) – that a lack of knowledge about a proposed change may hinder receptivity to that change. Yukl (1999) emphasises the importance of empowerment and discusses how "resistance can be a source of energy that enables people to collectively make better decisions about what type of change is needed" (p.40. These points were strongly supported by all interviewees in the study.

Roles, Responsibilities and Workload Implications

As previously mentioned, there have been some significant changes at USQ in the way the members of the academic community perform the tasks required to develop and implement flexible learning programs and services. A key pedagogical feature of the online teaching/learning environment is that the technology facilitates interaction through electronic means (discussion groups, email, virtual chats). This capability impacts on the design and delivery of course material and has caused a significant shift from the independent learner mode of traditional distance education courses to interaction between participants in online courses. Distance education also has meant staff have a larger, more varied cohort of students to service and track. Furthermore, teaching online has had a significant impact on student learning and staff workloads, as technology allows opportunity for increased online communication, changes in traditional teaching roles, and changes in the way information is published and resourced. A more commercial emphasis, changes in course design and delivery and a shift to a greater client focus (giving learners what they want, when and where they want it) has meant that courses are now being offered throughout the year, and in multiple modes. Students have been provided with opportunities to extend or shorten the time taken to complete particular units of work. University administrative systems have been put in place to accommodate this added flexibility but staff workload issues remain a major concern. One interviewee observed that "for a long time the university has operated on the goodwill of its staff, but when a job grows from that which is manageable to just another ten percent, things get a bit fractious about the edges". Several of the interviewees observed that USQ staff have already undergone role changes as a result of distance education initiatives so perhaps it is considered by management that staff are ready to undergo a further evolutionary move building on this history of organisational change.

Interview responses provided suggestions for ways to assist the workload situation. These include a reduction in course offerings with a focus on particular disciplines or courses that have already proved popular to learners. Reward/award systems might be established as an incentive for staff having to do the additional work involved which is often on top of existing workloads. However, the conflict still exists in institutions of higher education as to what is considered worthy of reward - research, teaching or a combination of both. The cost-saving benefits of major online initiatives are also still to be proven. An investigation conducted by the University of Illinois (1999) states: "Because high quality online teaching is time and labour intensive, it is not likely to be the income source envisioned by some administrators" (p. 1).

Loosely Coupled Networks/ Synergies and Alliances

One of the key themes emerging in the literature is the need for an organisation to enter into loosely coupled networks or strategic alliances in order to operate within the emerging global environment. Alliances with other knowledge producers, such as a partnership with an independent commercial provider in the case of USQ has been a strategy aimed at capitalising on the strengths of both partners and increasing student access to higher education. Kanter (1989) argues that "a major component of post-entrepreneurial strategy involves developing close working relationships with other organizations, extending the company's reach without increasing its size. Strategic alliances and partnerships are a potent way to do more with less" (p. 347). One interviewee observed that the online initiative at USQ "builds on existing expertise, positions USQ as an initiator and leader in full-scale, online delivery, draws on the capabilities of a commercial partner and also enables opportunities for joint partnerships with other academic institutions". The alliance enables USQ to offer its students global access by using the technology network. According to Higgins and Vincze (1989, in Limerick et al., 1998), "corporations with ambitions must turn to a new strategy of agreements, alliances, and mergers with other companies if they hope to survive" (p. 78). However, as raised in the interview data, the importance of a clear allocation of roles and responsibilities and a clear understanding of the capabilities of each partner is essential and there is also a need to choose strong partners, as synergies do not come out of combined weaknesses.

Technological Difficulties

An important consideration in the use of electronic delivery and communication systems is that of technical support. The interview data revealed that people who are unfamiliar with using technology spend a large amount of time coming to grips with it. Staff skills in using the Internet vary immensely, as do their learning styles. A Staff and Student Support (SSS) Focus Group has emerged out of the new committee structure. This group has been charged

with the responsibility of developing interactive, online education and training materials for staff. The group has also established a Staff Development Gateway web site which contains links to other courses available, Help Desk facilities, multiple resources, exemplary materials, teaching and learning advice and peer mentoring support. All interviewees acknowledged that these developments have been well received by staff. However, it was evident from the responses that there is still a need for face-to-face education and training support which is also managed by the SSS Focus Group. It was also acknowledged that this preparation may not be enough to alleviate all the concerns of academic staff and will have to be closely monitored and addressed. The advice through the interviews has been to slow the developmental process down in order to reflect on events and evaluate the initiative and make sure the operational components of the system are working well. It was observed that there is always more to be done but there is still a need for time out and reflection.

Conclusion

The use of an electronic environment such as USQ*Online* to provide learning experiences opens up new challenges in terms of teaching and learning. The interim evaluation conducted by the authors at USQ makes the following recommendations: open communication, consultation and collaboration should form the basis of all stages of such a major institutional initiative; roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders should be clearly defined; synergies and alliances with strong partners are essential; and there should be sound technological support at all levels. The key to organisational change and sustainability is shared vision, shared values and shared decision making. The trends in and impacts of the use of communication and information technologies in the higher education sector mean that change is an ongoing factor of tertiary education. This is not necessarily something to be feared as it also promises to offer some exciting challenges. As Eckel et al. (1999) observe, change is "an ongoing, organic process" and "there is no point in time at which everyone can declare a victory and go back to normal life" (p. 1). The challenge facing all education providers in the 21st century is to meet the needs of lifelong learners in the Information Age and distance education providers are uniquely positioned to service the needs of these learners.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

How would you describe the USQ*Online* initiative to other academics unfamiliar with the project?
What do you believe was/is the leaders' vision for USQ when initiating this project?
How was the vision communicated to USQ academic staff?
Reactions/personal reflections to/on the concept?
Reactions/personal reflections to/on the methods of communicating the concept.
Commendations and recommendations.

Appendix 2: Management Committee Structure