

Chapter 22

Reshaping Distance Education: Returning the Student to Centre Stage

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in higher education are confronted with a confusing and fragmented range of learning and teaching models for learners who are not traditional on-campus students. This chapter examines the development of guidelines to assist in the reshaping of a coursework Master's program in project management offered at a regional university. Using a coursework program as a case study, a holistic exploration has been carried out of the critical issues associated with teaching and learning at a distance, with a focus on the three layers of the institutional environment, the pedagogical frameworks and the learning setting of the actual students. The research methodology and design are discussed and the outcomes are presented to provide guidance for administrators, teachers and learners. The major outcome of this study is a holistic framework of Distance Education Learning Principles for Higher Education (DELPHE) as a meaningful tool for reshaping postgraduate distance education learning and teaching models.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is constantly responding to forces arising from changes in the political, financial, technological and social environment, and this study examines the requirements of a *postgraduate* distance education program in project management

to develop key principles for the future reshaping of the existing program. A case study approach within a regional university provided a holistic and in-depth examination of the program context, the key stakeholders, the institutional and pedagogical practices and the learning outcomes. Analysis of data from artefacts, interviews, survey and focus

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groups led to the development of comprehensive distance education learning principles for higher education (DELPHE) in the context of postgraduate coursework studies. This chapter presents an overview of the nine key principles and the sixteen sub-principles that were developed and provides recommendations for their application by University administrators and academics.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTION

Drivers for this study included a transition over recent years by the University from on-campus to distance education, increasing utilisation of educational technologies, changes to the University setting, the rapid growth in enrolments and the lack of an underlying philosophy regarding postgraduate studies for mature-aged students (Brookfield, 1995, p. 7, cited in Nunan, 2005; Cheetham & Chivers, 2000; Postle, Richardson, & Sturman, 2003; Project Management Institute, 2002). The research problem arose from a need to define an effective learning environment for the provision of distance education for project managers at postgraduate level, and the overarching research question that emerged was:

What are the guiding principles for the development of a conceptual framework for postgraduate distance education in project management?

THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The existing project management program provided a context for the study. Although the intention is to use the outcomes of this study to reshape the program, this chapter focuses only on the development of the guiding principles, and a future study will utilise these principles to reshape the project management program. What guidelines

should be used to create a new postgraduate learning environment for project management? What exemplars exist to guide us (Postle & Ellerton, 1999)? Piecemeal approaches to change can be counterproductive and “a well-articulated set of institutional values about learning, with a range of teaching strategies and technologies, plus a set of organisational systems and networks to support them” (Moran & Myringer, 1999, p. 60) are required.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Australian higher education sector experienced considerable changes in the post-Dawkins era in the 1980s, seeking to provide increased access for less-privileged students (Postle, Richardson, & Sturman, 2003), and distance education was adopted on a much broader scale. No clear pedagogical framework emerged to guide teaching and learning in distance education, especially for postgraduate coursework programs for professional education (Todhunter, 2003a, 2003b).

Flexibility has emerged as a strong theme in higher education as the focus has changed from teacher-centred delivery to one of student-centred learning (Taylor, 2001). Distance education is well placed to offer this flexibility and continues to evolve rapidly as technology provides opportunities for improved access, communication and quality of content (Garrison, 1997). However, there is a need to “develop a more integrated, coherent, and sophisticated program of research on distance learning that is based on theory” (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999, p. 27).

It is only when “anomalous conditions” (Imerstein, 1977; Postle, Sturman et al., 2003, p. 17) are evident that members of an organisation will contemplate change. From an organisational perspective, anomalies are problems that threaten the core functions of an organisation and which lead to reduced organisational performance (Simsek & Aytemiz, 1998). In this study, changes in or-

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