
Chapter X

Issues of Quality in Online Degree Programmes

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ABSTRACT

Online delivery of degree-level programmes is an attractive option, especially for working professionals and others who are unable to contemplate full-time residential university attendance. If such programmes are to be accepted, however, it is essential that they attain the same standards and quality as conventionally delivered degrees. We describe here the structures and processes developed for quality management and assurance in a programme of online master's level degrees in a UK university. The pedagogical approach places great emphasis on the role of online discussion in the teaching and learning process, and we argue that this also has a key role in the quality assurance process. We discuss ways in which techniques of artificial intelligence can be used to assist instructors and others to manage and evaluate discussions effectively.

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that there is a demand for education and in particular for degree-level courses from individuals for whom full-time university attendance is not a practicable option. The emergence of the Internet offers a new framework for the delivery of such courses. This model is likely to appeal especially to working professionals and others whose career or personal circumstances make it impossible for them to spend

a year or more at university, but for whom the opportunity to study and to obtain a high-level qualification is attractive. However, for applicants to an online degree programme, the perceived attractions of the mode of delivery are likely to be offset by corresponding doubts about the quality of the education offered and, consequently, the value of the qualification obtained.

Clearly, a university is the most appropriate organisation to provide degree-level courses, whether via the Internet or otherwise, and the reputation and experience of an established university offers the best assurance to prospective students that the degree programme they pursue will provide genuine value and academic standing. Offering a programme of study over the Internet, however, is very different in many respects from traditional university teaching. There have been, over a number of years, many attempts to develop systems to support a paradigm of online learning (see, e.g., Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Davies, 1998; Suthers & Jones, 1997). These systems may or may not mimic conventional lecture-room teaching, but will always involve major differences in the way in which teaching and student support are organised. Furthermore, the Internet lends itself naturally to an internationalisation of education delivery, but this too poses challenges for universities that have developed their structures within the framework of national education systems. Finally, the management and marketing of such programmes also involves skills and procedures that are largely unfamiliar to universities, but which belong in the repertoire of commercial organisations.

A key question, then, concerns how and to what extent can the qualities that make university education attractive be preserved in the context of a quite different model of delivery. Our purpose in this chapter is to address this question and especially to consider the corresponding issues of quality assurance. We do so in the context of an examination of a recently introduced programme of online study, which provides the opportunity for students to study for postgraduate degrees of master of science (MSc) and MBA, pursued entirely online. This development arises through a partnership between a “traditional” university in the UK and a commercial organisation with extensive experience in providing and marketing educational services. We describe here the planning and structure of the degree programmes.

As we have suggested, both the online medium and the partnership between a university and a commercial organisation raise serious issues for the delivery of degree-level programmes: issues of academic standards, pedagogic approach, assessment, student support, and quality assurance. Questions that arise include:

- Which of the processes, procedures, and teaching methods used within the university should be replicated in the online context, and how should this be done?
- What new problems arise in the management of online degree programmes, and how can they be addressed?
- Conversely, what shortcomings of conventional university teaching can be mitigated in an online environment?

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