

# Education Balanced Scorecard for Online Courses: Australia and US Best-Practices

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This case presents a best-practice in higher education, whereby a balanced scorecard approach was used to assess the effectiveness of a distance education (online) course in an accredited business degree program at an Australian public university. The assessment rubric was created by applying the concept of the balanced scorecard (from management science) to measure student performance, satisfaction, as well as content and delivery effectiveness. Performance was derived from the course grades while a validated survey instrument was utilized to gather estimates of all other factors from the students. One of the key lessons-learned in the case was that rather than reinvent the wheel, it was better to reuse accreditation surveys designed for the classroom to assess online courses and leverage the management science philosophy of measuring more than just performance to evaluate program success. Similar scorecard concepts have already been applied in U.S. universities, thus their differences with this case are also discussed.*

*Keywords:*     *Balanced Scorecard, Distance Learning, E-Learning, Multimedia in Education, Online Courses, Web-Enabled Technologies*

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## INTRODUCTION

“Are there management tools that professionals use in business that academics have used successfully in higher education? The answer to that question is yes, and the balanced scorecard (BSC) is one such tool” (Beard, 2009, p. 275). Beard refers to applying BSC in U.S. universities (and her review is insightful for practitioners). To that end, this case study similarly discusses a balanced scorecard applied to measure the effectiveness of an accredited online business course at an Australian public university (Strang, 2010).

Although the original experiment by Strang developed a BSC for university program accreditation maintenance in Australia, while comparing two identical business courses (online versus classroom-based), the focus of this study is to discuss Strang’s application of a balanced scorecard while, contrasting this to the U.S. approach (where applicable). A key distinction of Strang’s (2010) model is the course level-of-analysis and the integration of Australian national accreditation criteria, as compared to the 6-factor structure employed within the U.S. Baldrige

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National Quality Award Program (Beard, 2009; Karathanos & Karathanos, 2005). Strang (2010) integrated concepts from Kaplan and Norton's (2001) 4-factor BSC strategy as well as the stakeholder principles in the Intangible Assets Monitor (Sveiby, 2000).

## Key Challenges in Assessing Accredited Online Courses in Australia

It might be difficult for an 'outsider' to Australian higher education (universities) to appreciate the difficulty in offering totally online courses (as compared to the United States) or in measuring their effectiveness. What many people do not know is that currently Australian universities rarely use online course delivery (with tools such as voice and synchronous video to remote locations), because the culture and market are different in Australia (less demand) as compared with the United States. The term 'e-learning' is applied ambiguously in Australia, without actually meaning online synchronous student interaction for learning (Brabazon, 2002; Eklund, 2005; Manathunga, 2002). In Australian higher education practice, online or e-learning often refer to a student having Internet access to campus systems, primarily to download-and-print materials, for asynchronous discussion forums and for uploading assignment reports (Eklund, 2005; Lock & Redmond, 2008; Pauli, 2007). Exceptions do occur such as in the science and military industries where synchronous video software is being used for continuing/distance education (Newton & Ellis, 2005; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004; Zimmer, Billaud, & Geoffroy, 2006). As of this writing 2 of the 40 accredited Australian universities advertised synchronous online courses (in ElluminateLive).

Additionally, from experience and in the literature (Karemera, Reuben, & Sillah, 2003; Kobas & Renzie, 2005; Stevens-Long & Crowell, 2002), comparing Australian face-to-face with e-learning delivery for effectiveness is difficult because very little of the context may be consistent between the two modes (lack of experimental control). The instructor, materials, assessment requirements and teaching methods often differ (Drent & Meelissen, 2008; Grant, 2004; Kobas & Renzie, 2005). Multicultural Australian students often have vastly different learning styles and many use English as a second language (Strang, 2009a, 2009b). Online courses often refer to occasional unidirectional video lectures from an Australian campus received at a partner-satellite campus in an Asian country (managed by locals). All but a few of the 40 accredited universities in Australia are public, and thus procedures must be transparent.

There is considerable debate in the empirical literature on whether e-learning (or online education) is as effective as traditional face-to-face (campus) delivery – this was the impetus of Strang's (2010) original study as he compared online versus classroom courses. Many empirical studies have found e-learning is as effective as, or better, than face-to-face mode (Cybinski & Selvanathan, 2005; Gao & Lehman, 2003; St. Hill, 2000; Strang, 2007, 2010). On the other hand meta-analysis studies of e-learning versus classroom effectiveness are inconclusive about the '(no) significant difference' assertion (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Joy & Garcia, 2000; Olson & Wisher, 2002; Russell, 2002).

Finally, a key revelation in this study is the rationale for selecting and validating criteria in an educational BSC to assess an online course during the Australian accreditation maintenance cycle. U.S. universities applying the Malcolm Baldrige Education Award framework follow a similar philosophy using a different six-factor structure that captures indicators of student performance as well as staff satisfaction (Beard, 2009; Karathanos & Karathanos, 2005). Strang's BSC approach in Australia did not attempt to model the Malcolm Baldrige BSC concept but was instead inspired by Laurillard's (2007) propositions in UK, which called for a 'balanced measure' of student performance, student satisfaction and other organizational 'stakeholder' factors. More importantly, the interesting parallel with Sveiby's (2000) Intangible Assets Monitor as well as

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