

Comparative Study of the Usefulness of Online Technologies in a Global Virtual Business Project Team Environment

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Lifelong learning is quickly becoming an integrated part of today's working life because of the demand for keeping up to date with latest developments due to rapid change in technology and business. To maintain flexibility and quality, online technology is often used as a medium of educational service delivery. In this chapter, we examine a case where online technology has been used to co-ordinate virtual project teams (in an educational setting) around the world. The experience from the case study is that although online technology promises to offer an independent learning environment anytime and anywhere, only some aspects of the technology is useful depending on the nature of the task. In addition, there are behavioural and cultural issues, which can be exacerbated by under-developed personal relationships due to constraints imposed by online technology. The case study also shows that synchronous communication is not necessarily a better means to co-ordinate than its asynchronous counterpart. A challenge faced by online education providers is to find the right mix and how to come up with a framework that will provide optimal results.

BACKGROUND

The funding for universities in Australia has dropped from 89-90% fifteen years ago to about 50% by the end of 1999. At the same time, demand for education has increased simply because of the rapid pace of technological change and new

business innovation. In the area of Electronic Commerce (E-Commerce), the demand for courses has grown rapidly, from hardly any subject offered in 1997, to almost all universities offering some form of E-Commerce education. This is not only an Australian phenomenon. Universities around the world have come to realise that E-Commerce education is very much in demand. Most business schools now have students enrolled in E-Commerce.

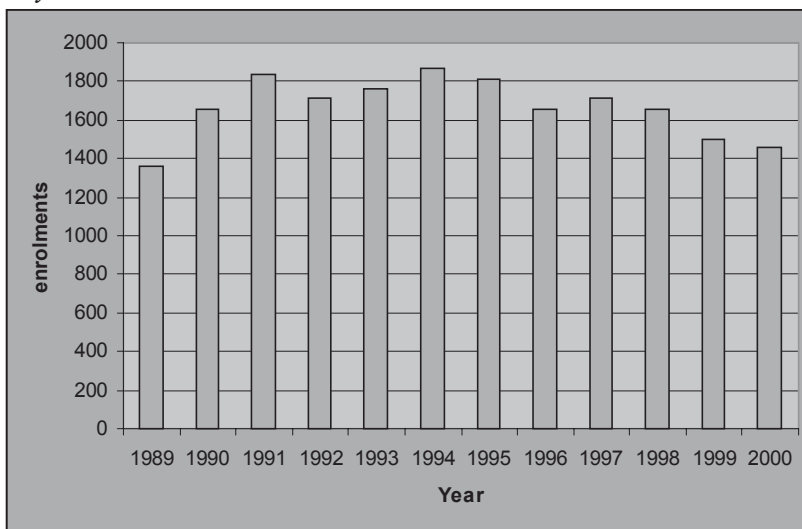
Murdoch University is one of the four universities in the city of Perth, Western Australia. Perth is one of the most remote capital cities in Australia and in the world, being more than 4,000 km from the country's other capital cities such as Sydney or Melbourne. Despite the tyranny of distance, Perth has a vibrant group of universities and is particularly active in E-Commerce education.

Murdoch University is a medium size university by Australian standards and is located in Murdoch - a suburb of Perth. The university is named after an academic and essayist Sir Walter Murdoch. "Planning for the university began in 1970. The second university to be established in Western Australia and the seventeenth in Australia, it was constituted on 25 July 1973 by an act of Parliament of Western Australia. In 1975, its inaugural year, Murdoch University enrolled 672 undergraduate students, had 6 full Professors, a dynamic young staff on a 254 hectares campus. Today, Murdoch offers more than 50 undergraduate programmes (majors) of study, has over 11,000 students enrolled, employs over 50 full professorial staff and includes a regional campus located at Rockingham." (<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/about/murdoch.html>)

According to the introduction on its Campus-wide Information System (<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/about/murdoch.html>):

"Murdoch University combines the best in university teaching with outstanding graduate satisfaction and a flexible outlook that let students design the

Figure 1. Student Enrollment Numbers in Distance Education at Murdoch University



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