

Chapter 26

The Challenges and Opportunities of Online Postgraduate Coursework Programs in a Traditional University Context

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ABSTRACT

Educational technologies have led to a mainstreaming of distance education across the Australian tertiary sector, so that some remote delivery is now expected of nearly all universities. At postgraduate level, the flexibility of online delivery supports development of niche courses that have strategic significance for industries and the nation. When combined with another expanding (yet seemingly marginal) activity—postgraduate coursework—this development can present a number of challenges and opportunities. As a consequence traditional on-campus universities are now engaging in modes of educational delivery that do not necessarily align to their organizational culture, structures of governance, policy, administration and pedagogical norms. This chapter draws on four illustrative case studies to explore the complexities that arise from the convergence of these non-traditional activities in a traditional setting. In so doing, it critically examines the challenges that a traditional Australian university faces in the delivery of postgraduate distance education and identifies the opportunities that are likely to assist traditional institutions in planning and supporting this type of degree provision.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid 1990s the provision of postgraduate coursework master degrees within the Australian higher education context has undergone a period of rapid growth, both in terms of student enrolments and the number of programs on offer. In many respects this trend reflects the increasing demand within specialist fields of study for advanced professional education that equips practitioners for the challenges of current and future work practices. Furthermore, the capacity of universities to provide access to this type of education has been greatly enhanced following the deregulation of distance education and the recent advances in information and communication technologies.

Using four illustrative case studies from the University of Sydney, Australia, this paper explores the complexities arising from the provision of flexible postgraduate coursework masters programs within a non-distance education university context. To set the scene the paper begins by outlining the characteristics of postgraduate coursework, and its associated student population. This is followed by a brief review of the literature discussing the uptake of distance education in a more traditional university setting. Then each case study is introduced, highlighting the strategic significance, course context and delivery framework. This information is used as a backdrop to discussing the challenges and opportunities that arise when traditional universities engage in modes of educational delivery that do not necessarily align with their organizational culture, structures of governance and policy, administrative infrastructure and pedagogical norms.

SETTING THE SCENE: TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND POSTGRADUATE COURSEWORK AT A DISTANCE

Postgraduate Coursework

Postgraduate coursework is a relatively recent yet strategic educational trend, particularly in the more traditional university contexts where the emphasis of course provision is undergraduate students and higher degree research. Over the last two decades, the provision of, and participation in, postgraduate coursework masters programs has undergone a period of rapid growth, with a more than 119 per cent increase in commencing postgraduate coursework students across the Australian higher education sector between 1993 and 2003 (DEST, 2004). By 2004, postgraduate coursework students comprised 12 per cent of total domestic student coursework participation in Australia (DEST, 2004). In our context at the University of Sydney, postgraduate coursework load almost doubled between 1998 and 2006, with a corresponding increase in the number of courses accepting postgraduate students (McCallum, 2007). This demand for accessible professional education is also reflected internationally, particularly in the western world (see for instance, United States Department of Education & National Centre for Educational Statistics, 2002; van der Wende, 2002).

As a student body, postgraduate coursework participants are distinct from other types. They are more diverse, tend to study in more flexible ways and across a wide range of niche areas and as a result are rarely identifiable as a politically or economically significant group (Cluett & Skene, 2006). Typically, they are mature-aged professionals who are studying part-time and juggling professional and personal commitments. At the

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