

Chapter 5.14

Differing Challenges and Different Achievements: The Case for a Separate Classification for Qualifications Undertaken by E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has traditionally been provided in universities through lectures, seminars and tutorials, and other social mechanisms of learning where students interact in less formal settings. This chapter highlights some of the differences that occur when higher education is provided by e-learning provisions and argues that the challenges that students face and the differences in student-tutor and student-student interactions are sufficiently different to warrant that such degrees be awarded under a separate qualification classification. Drawing on research carried out at Ashridge Business School, UK, into the realities of getting started in e-learning, and a

literature review of e-student and e-tutor issues, the argument is made that actually succeeding at this form of learning requires additional skills, motivation and discipline that should be more widely recognized, and that this would be best achieved through a separate qualifications classification. Such a classification would also ensure that e-learning degrees are equivalent to their more traditionally earned counterparts.

INTRODUCTION

Until the Internet boom, higher education was mainly offered in three formats: full-time, part-time and a traditional form of distance learning

of self-directed study around paper-based guides (with tutor support via telephone), supplemented with residential blocks and summer schools that provided an interactive element. There were also some corporate programs being provided, but these were delivered in the form of a combination of the previous formats. E-learning differs from the other forms of delivery because it changes the element of tutor-student and student-student interaction so that it occurs through computer-mediated technology, rather than face to face or even over the telephone. Hence the communication process becomes asynchronous and does not take place in real time. Drawing on research into e-learner experiences reported in the literature, and primary research carried out at the Ashridge Business School, UK, this chapter argues that this difference needs much stronger recognition than it currently has, and, as such, a separate qualifications classification should be drawn up to take into account these differences to ensure that quality standards are maintained by e-learning providers of higher education.

In May 2004, Ashridge Business School published a research report based on a multimethod investigation into organizations' experiences introducing e-learning. Sixteen organizations were case studied through a series of interviews, observations and document data collection, and 29 of their "virtual learning resource centre" (VLRC) client companies participated in a survey to ensure that the learning from the case studies was applicable to a wider population. Many of the case study organizations were early pioneers into e-learning (such as, Mercer and Xerox Europe), while others had only engaged in e-learning initiatives more recently (such as, Logicom, Volvo and Electrocomponents). While not all the organizations involved in the Ashridge research were pursuing higher-education awards specifically, the experiences of the learners, developers, implementers and tutors involved are still directly comparable. They had to learn to interact for the purposes of learning through computer-mediated

technology, and their employees had to both work and study which is typical of the e-learner, rather than them being full-time students. However, it should be noted that the learners that are discussed in this chapter, in the context of the corporate e-learning experiences, did not have the additional benefit of an award at the end of their efforts to add to their motivation. The case study data is discussed throughout the chapter to illustrate the key points being made.

Although e-learning has not been the panacea that some expected at the start of the 21st century, it may yet be. The expansion of e-learning has not materialized as quickly as initially predicted, but this does not mean that it will not happen in an elongated time frame. As Diebold (1996) observes, things usually take much longer to happen than you expect them to, and you cannot anticipate what people will do with a new technology. The dot.com boom and bust cycle highlighted that technology can be ahead of the market, as illustrated by the fact that consumers were not quite ready for the anytime, anywhere shopping experience. The same could be said of e-learning. Some universities, for example, invested heavily in developing e-learning courses that have not recruited enough students to be viable (e.g., the Global University Alliance and Universitas 21), although the market in some areas is buoyant (e.g., the University of Phoenix). Media companies also have moved into this territory (such as, Worldwide Learning, part of the News International Group), but have failed as yet to establish a worthwhile market.

Arguably the development of e-learning is being carried out by the wrong people. Academics are being "encouraged" within some institutions to put their wares "online," and this is exactly what they are doing—putting lecture materials online. This is not good e-learning, and not surprisingly, it is not selling well or showing signs of being successful. In essence, it is a substandard degree offering. Birchall and Smith (2002) confirm that the quality of e-learning offerings is seen as variable, so the potential for loss of e-learning credibility

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