Learning lessons: why choose distance learning in education management?

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Examines an increasingly important feature of further and higher education provision: the development of distance-learning opportunities for managers and teachers interested in education management qualifications in the context of a newly marketized education service in England and Wales. Draws on a university survey of prospective distance-learning "clients" who had expressed an interest in postgraduate education management courses - now a major growth area - and analyses their stated needs and concerns. Considers, also, the impact of the developing education market on the professional demand for distance learning, and examines how far quality provision and academic excellence can be delivered and maintained by institutions as the new "value for money" imperative, increasingly driving the "professional development business".

As the balance of relationships in the education service in England and Wales altered following the Education Reform Act 1988, we have witnessed a fundamental market-focused transition - in schools, colleges and universities - which has progressively begun to drive institutional responsiveness in education towards customer priorities, client concerns and centralized funding priorities. A fundamental part of this new "marketized" orientation (but, arguably one of the less publicized aspects) has been the structural shift in the nature of continuing professional development (CPD) and in-service education and training (INSET) for education managers and teachers. This paper examines the nature of "client demand" in the developing education market - a major focus for those involved in meeting professional development needs. In particular, it examines consumer interest in - and concerns about - distance-learning educational provision; doing so through the lens of interest shown in postgraduate education management programmes (now a major growth area) which result largely from the devolution of funds and administration away from LEAs towards "incorporated" and "self-managing" institutions (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988, 1992). It investigates how potential distance-learning students evaluate providers and determine priorities, then briefly considers how the impact of marketization on provider-client relationships in the new "professional development business" raises questions about quality and consistency of provision.

Reframing and restructuring education

The expansion of distance-learning provision has been facilitated by a restructured education service in England and Wales - involving not just schools, but also colleges and universities in a range of initiatives which have changed the delivery and funding patterns of professional development. For example, there is:

- the ongoing reframing of "academic" and "vocational" curricula on a wide scale;
- the introduction and review of the national curriculum in schools (with hints of national curricula for higher and further education);
- the introduction of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) accompanied by a focus on "competency" at management levels, through the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) for example;
- the establishment of "institutionally-centred" management in school and tertiary sectors, with the identification of differential funding patterns between locally managed schools (LMS) and grant maintained schools (GMS) and "incorporated" further and higher education institutions; and
- the inception of new funding regimes under the auspices of the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS), the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC).

We have also experienced rapid moves towards mass participation in higher education accompanied by an erosion of staffing ratios; the increased centralization of professional development funding priorities with the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) scheme (DfE, 1993a) accompanied by diminished and reprofiled local education authority (LEA) roles, bringing a move to "agency arrangements" strongly focused on meeting customer need (Morris, 1990). Each of these developments and initiatives has helped to nudge providers, customers and clients into a reframed relationship - holding the prospect of apparently more cost-effective teaching and learning strategies involving a variation on "self-supported study", "independent learning", flexible or distance education - each a strategic endeavour to match demand with often increasingly stretched resources.

Each government-led initiative has, in turn, impacted on the identification and prioritizing of personal, professional and institutional development needs at all levels in institutions - whether as "purchasers" or "providers" of services. Further more, each development is contextualized in the UK's apparently long-lasting recessionary economic climate - in its
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Early days vociferously linked to government-led "back to basics" philosophies, with their emphasis on personal responsibility rather than state support. Whether examined at the level of staff and professional development or in terms of undergraduate studies, the focus of commitment and funding support has shifted progressively towards the individual and away from the institution; towards loans and away from grants; towards instrumentalist "training" opportunities and away from broader "education" imperatives. With the emergence of an increasingly competitive postgraduate "qualifications market", we are faced with a new credentialist focus, where arguably, individualized needs could be met through negotiated curricula in a newly-enlarged, post-binary university sector. It is here, perhaps, that the newer universities with their traditionally stronger vocational profile, have led the way to developing innovative professional qualifications.

Each of these elements has helped to provoke structural and methodological changes in professional development provision. It is an irony perhaps that, while the trend is towards self-sufficiency in funding with the rhetoric of demand focused on individual customers, we are simultaneously seeing personal needs subsumed by and within institutional needs. Accompanying this, it has been argued that we are moving closer to a "culture of personal learning" (Kerry, 1993) which is learner-led and materials-centred, rather than teacher-directed (Fuller et al., 1989). This focus may indicate an attempt at managing the difficult balance between meeting individual agendas while satisfying institutional demands – a point underpinned, perhaps, by the increasing use of the language of "partnership" between higher education, schools/colleges, and individual teachers, and noted as a possible focus for future development, for example, in the Open University's own professional development work (Craft, 1994).

Traditionally, site-based, award-bearing postgraduate opportunities in higher education (i.e. Master's degrees, advanced diplomas and postgraduate certificates) have offered students continuity and depth of study, provided through a focused academic resource base, direct links into a professional "community of scholars", accredited learning pathways, personalized tutor counselling/support and, more recently, the development of flexible, modularized course options (Morrison, 1993).

More recently, however, course providers – especially those closest to the public sector vocational interface – have been confronted by the twin pressures of consumerism and quality assessment, which are driving a reframing of their activities. Increasingly, providers must satisfy "consumer demand" in a constrained economic climate where government-determined national and local funding priorities are imposed. In addition, they need to meet the "quality" imperative: ensuring that courses are delivered, monitored and evaluated with a focus on high quality provision – however that most elusive and value-laden "quality" concept is defined (Pfeffer and Coote, 1991).

As well as changing policy and a new legislative framework, several training initiatives have encouraged a reframing of professional (and in particular, management) development. The need for greater "site-based" management training and support has been articulated by, among others, the School Management Task Force (SMTF) report (DES, 1990), and there has also been considerable pressure to explore competence-based management training and assessment – emanating particularly from the Department of Employment (DOE), Department for Education (DfE) and the Management Charter Initiative (Earley, 1992; Elliott, 1991; Gealy, 1993; Whitty and Willmott, 1991).

Each of these initiatives has broadened the debate over changing the "learning climate", although it is increasingly clear that, in many cases, insufficient attention has been paid to developing what might be called the "learning support environment", including, for example, the provision of library facilities for distance learners (Unwin, 1994). Potential students are thus increasingly encouraged to demand more flexible but-bespoke qualifications – from an increasingly widening national range of higher education (HE) course portfolios where distance is no object but support mechanisms cannot necessarily be guaranteed.

Undoubtedly, however, the most important influence on this reframing of professional development provision has been the changed policy and funding framework in which HE, FE, LEAs and private "consultancy" providers now operate. We have seen the effective "privatization of INSET" (Harland et al., 1993) with its developing competitive, price-cutting bias; the disappearance of teacher release and secondment (DfE, 1993b); and an associated rise in self-funded, income-generating development. All this has occurred in (and because of) what Dempster (1991) has called a "quasi-market economy in in-service education and training". As a consequence, more diversified teaching and learning strategies for teacher professional development have been utilized to match increased student demand alongside the...
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Institutional rationalization of teaching support in a constrained financial climate. There is, in short, an increased emphasis on open, flexible and distance learning – with the Open University facing an albeit limited challenge to what has been, for more than 20 years, its own “flexible learning monopoly”.

Aside from long-term professional development courses and programmes, the current competitive ethos has also pressured providers to offer, integrate (and, importantly, accredit) half- and one-day “learning episodes” (Day, 1991) – the kind of professional support now less easily met by restructured LEAs. The research evidence on which this article is based shows that individual teachers as “education clients” with significant buying power are increasingly adopting pragmatic, practical and career-related professional perspectives, deriving in large part from changes in funding at both personal and institutional level which are a feature of the marketization of education. Teachers, more than ever before, are now prepared to search for cost-effective and tailor-made postgraduate programmes which match their own personal needs – and pockets. While many may continue to opt for their local provider, this is no longer an inevitable decision: a significant number are prepared to “play the field” before choosing a course.

Confronted with a buyer’s market, and in order to secure or if possible expand their “client” base, providers are now keener to be seen as catering for those wishing to adopt a “lifelong learning” focus and committed to grasping “flexible learning” opportunities. Such strategies do, however, mean that provider menus are increasingly framed by an ongoing instability (particularly as professional development policy is subjected to rapid change under the auspices of the Teacher Training Agency), even if they enable clients to take responsibility for their own learning and professional development, and to develop broader and more personally satisfying transferable skills.

This is a particularly important development for what continues to be a relatively underpaid and immobile teaching force – one which is often limited in option by economic recession and potentially restrictive career development prospects (National Commission on Education, 1993, pp. 221-3). Put crudely, the options for universities are becoming more and more clear: expand and diversify your provision into “niche” areas if necessary, overcome your traditional geographical constraints, or risk a potential contraction of your student market.

For the older (i.e. non-polytechnic) universities, the development of flexible-learning course programmes may seem a difficult prospect because of the perception that traditional notions of “academic excellence” need to be maintained and defended from “flexibility”. This conception of role has, somehow, to be reconciled with the “market-driven” need to establish credible learning strategies for the new entrepreneurial climate, most of which are already current in the best flexible/distance-learning institutions (Dixon, 1987; Hodgson et al., 1987; Paine, 1989; Race, 1986).

For older universities the focus has rested on retaining what is perceived to be quality provision and academic reputation, while maximizing student autonomy and learner-directedness. Newer universities, in many respects, face the opposite problems: a CNAA background and academically broad-based student populations have encouraged more highly diversified learning strategies, while the sometimes limited research base in polytechnics has initiated questions about the nature, quality and depth of their “academic excellence”. As a way of exploring further some of these issues, the next section examines the priorities and concerns of potential customers for distance-learning provision in education management.

Developing diversity: identifying the issues

Keele University, where the author was Director of In-service Education, was one of the first tranche of older universities in England and Wales to join the distance-learning education market at the end of the 1980s. Its MBA education, launched in 1991, was the first part-time, distance-learning MBA in England specifically designed for educationists. It was followed, a year later, by a similarly structured MA (education management) programme targeted at the needs of middle and aspiring managers in education.

A random sample of 200 enquirers who had requested information regarding postgraduate distance-learning, education management courses during late summer/ autumn 1994, was later asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire. The questionnaire structure was kept deliberately simple and was concerned primarily to examine the “public image” of distance-learning provision in general; and second, to obtain feedback on the perceived importance of distance learning as opposed to site-based provision to potential “customers”. Finally, it was hoped to gain some “market intelligence” on the impact of our own distance-learning information pack to inform future strategic planning.
Respondents ranked a list of general features of distance-learning courses and gave structured responses on the qualitative aspects of courses as they perceived them through the literature they had received. Further, many took up opportunities to respond to open-ended questions. The questionnaire also invited them to give their address/geographical location and gender if they wished.

Of the 60 responses received (representing a 30 per cent response rate), 25 returns came from males, 22 from females and 13 were of unspecified gender. No reminders were sent. Where results are reported in this article, percentages are provided along with numbers in order to allow for comparison. Clearly, however, it is vital to note that any conclusions drawn which are based on percentage/numerical results need to be treated with some caution.

Responses were received from as far afield as Exeter to the Shetland Islands, although one-fifth of returns were from potential students living within 30 miles of the University. This article summarizes the research findings in the belief that, first, they may help further the national debate about the nature of effective learning strategies and, second, they may contribute to a better understanding of student motivation, successful course organization and the desiderata of quality materials (Thorpe and Grugeon, 1989). It is also recognized that the group surveyed were effectively “self-selected” potential distance learners, since they had already requested information on distance-learning programmes and were obviously seriously contemplating such a learning strategy.

Undoubtedly a strong rationale remains for site-based opportunities but this article presents that, in the near future, traditional practices will be increasingly influenced in their course methodologies, attendance requirements and assessment strategies, by an expanding distance-learning market. We now briefly examine the context within which new distance education developments are taking place.

The context for distance education developments

While the distance education tradition is relatively longstanding within England and Wales – established largely through the dynamic of the Open University – the growing breadth and variety of provision within British universities is a relatively recent phenomenon. Perhaps understandably – and in common with experience elsewhere in the world – no single and agreed definition of “distance education” exists. Holmberg (1993) suggests that it “covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization”. Furthermore, he asserts, “there are different kinds of distance education, and it is important to realize that even seemingly parallel systems include different components and media” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 202).

The difficulty in settling on one universal definition is reflected in the fact that a range of terms is used interchangeably. The concept of “open learning” is increasingly used as an alternative term to both distance education and distance learning within the British context and this approach, at least to some degree, reflects the impact of the Open University’s role on public and educational perceptions (Thorpe, 1988, p. 56). This paper, for example, uses the term “distance learning” interchangeably with “distance education”.

Some writers consider that distance education is simply a subdivision of open learning (Lewis and Spencer, 1986, p. 8), although this view has been challenged on the basis that not all distance education is necessarily “open” (Holmberg, 1993). However, Daniel (1993) argues that “open learning is a goal or an ideal; distance education is neutral, it can either be open or closed, flexible or inflexible, depending on the course or the system”. Moreover, there is a longstanding debate regarding precisely what constitutes the boundaries of distance teaching, distance learning and distance study. Holmberg (1985), for example, suggests that while “distance study” centres on the student activities, “distance teaching” focuses on tutoring and tutorial organization.

The two key elements normally associated with the distance education process – that of pre-produced course materials and student-tutor communication – are central features in many course structures. Despite concerns that distance education may be too readily focused on knowledge transfer and fact assimilation (Fox, 1983, p. 15), an increasing body of evidence indicates that distance education has the potential to promote effective learning in that it is able to engage students fully – to the benefit of both their intellectual and emotional development (Keegan, 1993; Lockwood, 1995).

While distance education is frequently utilized as a mediator for professional training, the nature of the materials being used and the method of communication between...
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tutor and student have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the activity and benefits to students. The danger with linear-focused and overly self-contained course texts is that they do not encourage, facilitate or even provide access to alternative sources of ideas and argument. Nevertheless, while course providers clearly need to pay close attention to both the accessibility and the variety of the course support materials they provide, Byner (1986) has pointed to the effectiveness of distance education at Master's level within universities.

Clearly, in establishing their programmes, distance educators have to address the needs of both groups and individuals. However, according to Holmberg (1995):

there is no evidence that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group. The only common factor is that, with few exceptions, these students are adults and consequently are gainfully employed and/or look after their families (p. 12).

What Holmberg (1993) calls “group thinking” (where students studying at a distance are treated as part of a group) tends to lead to a more control-oriented model of teaching and learning – with fixed starting-points, assignment deadlines, course duration and examinations (Leslie, 1979). The alternative strategy, whereby individual students are regarded as totally autonomous – e.g. determining their own study programmes, timetables, submission deadlines and level of communications with the teaching organization – is also utilized and is probably the most common approach internationally (Graff and Holmberg, 1988).

While an “individualized” focus may predominate on a global scale, it is not unusual for the two strategies to be utilized in an overlapping manner (Holmberg, 1985, pp. 8-10) and there is evidence that, while more autonomous individuals are likely to be particularly attracted to distance education, they do not necessarily reject guidance (Moore, 1976, cited in Holmberg, 1993). Overall, research (e.g. Flinck, 1980; Glatter and Wedell, 1971; Woodley, 1983) indicates that adult students often prefer distance education over campus-based approaches largely because of the: convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to individual students’ needs. A predilection for entirely individual work is frequently referred to... apparently a majority of students in developed countries, which do offer real choices, choose distance education because they genuinely prefer it to other modes. This is, of course, to be expected from adults whose family, professional and social commitments make face-to-face teaching, bound by a fixed timetable, less attractive or unrealistic (Holmberg, 1995).

In addition, while recent developments in media technologies, e.g. teleconferencing, have stimulated increased interest in the potential of distance education among potential providers, there is evidence that students still prefer individualized study – predominantly utilizing printed study material (Garrison, 1990, p. 15).

Analysing the results

Rating distance-learning provision
Respondents were asked to rank seven features of distance learning in order of importance to themselves. The results show that there is a marked bunching of responses for each feature, usually with three adjoining rank positions accounting for the majority of responses. These are given in Table I.

Other reasons were given in nine responses, four commenting on the lack of local opportunity, two on the need to utilize independent learning skills, and a further three seeing the provision as relevant to personal professional needs. The major strength of distance learning is seen by respondents as being in the ability to work at home at their own pace. Subsequent comments also suggest that flexible start-dates are an important consideration as potential postgraduates attempt to balance study programmes with professional roles and responsibilities.

Boud (1990, p. 6) asserts that “learning for meaning and tight teacher control sit uneasily together. Learners must make their own maps of knowledge”. However, the fine balance of pressures between encouraging student autonomy and providing a tight course structure can be difficult to attain: as one survey respondent comments: “The structure is really important to me. I want something to keep me going but without too much freedom or I might not do it”. The issue of achieving this balance has been reviewed by Daniel and Marquis (1979):

If a system has, as its chief priority, respect for the freedom and autonomy of the individual student, it will allow him [sic] to begin a course whenever he chooses and to finish it at his convenience. The student faces himself and there are no external constraints although the good correspondence school, whose model this is, will have a system of written reminders, encouraging phone calls and even financial incentives to incite him to keep at it. Nevertheless the drop out, or non-completion rate, with such a free approach is usually horrendous (over 50 per cent) if the students are humans rather than angels (p. 34).
The Keele programme endeavours to capitalise on both control and autonomy strategies. It does so, on the one hand, by providing each cohort of students (i.e. those joining at the same time) with a clearly structured teaching and assessment framework capable, for example, of maximizing group networking and support opportunities. However, on the other, it also facilitates individual student autonomy by offering the potential for personalized and flexible programme design and through opportunities to adopt a slow tracking approach when, for professional and/or family reasons, students may become separated from their original cohort or support group.

Overall, respondents see opportunities for home-based study as the most attractive feature of distance education, commenting on, for example, “the avoidance of traffic” and “the need to find a course which is compatible with the need to remain at home”. A higher percentage of females emphasize the importance of home-based study - 78 per cent compared with 68 per cent of males and, furthermore, nine of the 12 local respondents were female, suggesting perhaps an attempt to explore flexible, local opportunities so that the benefits of both locality and distance learning can be exploited fully. Prospective students are also attracted by “working with prestigious organisations”, the availability of “courses which are beneficial in content” and the “opportunity of using independent learning skills”.

Prospective students considered that the second most attractive feature was the ability to determine one’s own timetable. Percentage responses for men and women were similar, with time being considered only slightly more important in ranking than being able to undertake a course without attending frequent course sessions. While distance education saves student time and can be effective for learning, it does, nevertheless, increase the need to provide “more time, skill and application on the part of the tutor than may normally be found in ‘essay marking’ on campus” (Elton, 1988).

Concern about the quality of course materials is reflected in responses to later survey questions, but, surprisingly perhaps, is not given a high ranking as a feature of distance learning provision by respondents. In reflecting on distance-learning as a concept, however, respondents place cost and assessment related to work/professional role as even less important. Although they also rank support in the broadest sense from their own institution least important of all, at this stage it is, nevertheless, actually seen as an important factor in determining whether to embark on a course. The definition of “support” encompasses both time allocation and financial support in respondents’ open comments, but does not necessarily imply an abdication of institutional responsibility or control.

The issue of the balance between support for learning and the nature of institutional responsibility remains a complex one. Gilliard (1991) argues that “learning in distance education is supervised but not invigilated, organised but not controlled, student centred but not anarchic”. However, Peters (1973) argues that the concept of distance education does not necessarily dispel the power relationship between the institution and the learner, since it is not “dominance-free learning”.

The notion of support has been a key element in establishing distance-learning courses in education management at Keele. In addition, the course philosophy incorporates the notion of empathy - defined by Holmberg (1993) as the “power of projecting oneself into and understanding someone else’s thinking and feeling” - as fundamental in developing effective distance education programmes, with course information endearment to communicate that empathy and student support as are key aspects of Keele’s professional ethos.

Table 1
Ranking of distance-learning features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>High value</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Low value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-based study</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting own time/pace</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course cost</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No need to attend frequently</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment related to role</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good quality materials</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from institution</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional reasons offered by ten potential students included the “commitment” requirement of a given course, its previous status and record, and its relevance to promotional and professional development needs. The importance of course content is summarized by one respondent as its “relevance to my experience and my future needs”.

Respondents regarded course costs as an important factor in choosing between courses, although there is a spread of ranking on this as a factor. The cost effectiveness of provision from a student’s perspective can only be identified by determining precisely what is offered within the distance education package. Holmberg (1995) points out that “pure correspondence study, relying exclusively on the written word as its medium, can be very inexpensive if it is offered on a large scale, so that the cost of each course can be spread out over several thousand students”, but notes that more complex or sophisticated systems bring higher costs. Commentaries in survey responses indicate that a number of prospective students undertake a fairly complex cost-benefit analysis to determine the course they will follow. The ongoing debate over the economics of distance education (Keegan, 1990; Perraton, 1982; Rumble, 1986), reflects the fact that the complexities of cost-benefit analyses are also crucial issues for providing institutions:

It is possibly only to claim that there are circumstances in which distance teaching looks attractive from an economic point of view. Economies of scale are possible. But distance education characteristically has high fixed costs and, with relatively low student numbers, its costs can be higher than those of conventional education. (Perraton, 1982, p. 61)

Responses regarding the need for course attendance were widely spread in terms of ranking, although a number of respondents believe that it can “give the opportunity to reduce the isolation you feel in doing your own work”. Others, however, concur with the comment that “attendance destroys the real meaning of distance learning”. The nature of the study programme, the perceived quality of materials and the clarity and depth of course information are less significant choice factors overall. In addition, tutor support, a student support network and course office backup, are all ranked as much less important in choosing between courses, although several open comments do refer to “the availability of some system of support from other students”, and the idea that the “first point of contact tells you so much”.

Choice between courses is based, above all, on course content. Thereafter, it appears that students focus on cost issues, often involving some kind of cost-effectiveness evaluation. This points to the need for providers to utilize publicity materials stressing both the tangible and intangible benefits of courses. Overall, survey results indicate that respondents are seeking self-contained and well-structured courses, with as many potential customers attracted by a residential element as inhibited by the need to attend course sessions.

Respondents had contacted widely varying numbers of institutions in order to secure information, as shown in Table III. Although the majority had contacted three or more providers, 12 had contacted only their nearest university – within the 30-mile radius – reflecting what might be called a “modified distance-learning wish”.

Widely differing opinions exist regarding the nature of course information sent by providers in response to enquiries. Half of respondents found distance-learning information packs more impressive than those offered for more traditional provision because of the “comprehensiveness of detail”, presentation and clarity of explanation, and the “user-friendly approach”.

One-fifth of respondents felt that there were major deficiencies in some of the information packs they had received, including “lack of information on residentials”, “little evidence of previous success” and “wide variation in

Table II
Ranking of influences on course choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>High value</th>
<th>Rank order</th>
<th>Low value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course content</td>
<td>32 14 6</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td>4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance requirement</td>
<td>11 13 12</td>
<td>4 1 0</td>
<td>0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course cost</td>
<td>10 8 7 4</td>
<td>1 0 3 1</td>
<td>2 3 4 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of materials</td>
<td>5 4 7 8</td>
<td>18 7 4 3</td>
<td>1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study programme</td>
<td>2 11 13</td>
<td>10 11 5 1</td>
<td>0 0 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course information</td>
<td>1 2 3 8</td>
<td>8 8 17 10</td>
<td>5 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor support</td>
<td>0 2 3 5</td>
<td>5 6 23 5</td>
<td>1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office support</td>
<td>0 2 1 1</td>
<td>1 5 5 14 21</td>
<td>1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student support</td>
<td>0 1 0 2</td>
<td>0 3 5 21</td>
<td>1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III
Number of institutions contacted for information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Contacted by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 5</td>
<td>1</td>
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structure, detail and information". Not surprisingly, the more information respondents had obtained, the greater the tendency to see a variation between material. However, comments show that content, rather than the impact of the material was regarded as the most important factor.

Good material was commended for its clarity, user-friendliness and consistency between sections of the information. While potential students seek clear presentation, they are also anxious to have comprehensive details expressed in an understandable way without too much concentration on assessment patterns. They would like to know what other students following the course have achieved and what the study programme means in terms of time demands.

Provider reputation and institutional image Course registration decisions appear to have been made not simply on the basis of published information, but also on other knowledge about a providing institution. Approximately half of respondents referred to the importance of the provider’s reputation as an influence on course commitment decisions, although more than three-quarters offered at least an implicit reference to elements of reputation, indicating a subconscious assessment of quality. Table IV summarizes these elements of reputation.

Comments on provider reputation included references to the “leadership and standing of university staff”, and its “good past links with the local education authority”, while a further two noted the importance of “the research record”.

Responses indicated overall that local and national “people networks” are significant, particularly where reputation is based on previous student experience: 20 respondents had learned about course reputation by word of mouth – through colleague networks, from previous course members and though working with the institution in other ways. Fourteen had gained their information from journals and the press – with the Times Education Supplement (TES) emerging as a key information source.

Previous association with a particular provider is considered a very important factor. For example, one respondent comments that were “both my children there”, while another points to “my previous experience of the university” as a major reason to return. Yet another refers to “knowledge of the first degree requirements which suggested standards were high”. Three respondents had actually visited each of the three institutions that they had contacted for information – despite the fact that they were intending to work at a distance; the motive may be seen in the comment “so that I could get to know something of the people”. In open comments, one potential student suggested that sample materials would be a help in deciding on a course, while others commend the warmth of response to their enquiries even at the initial enquiry stage.

Respondents were also asked to rank perceived negative aspects of course provision in an attempt to abstract the reasons for choice while avoiding leading questions. From this information it is possible to assess main motivating factors in eventual course choice. Table V summarizes evaluations of the negative aspects of course offers: these responses are much more spread than in previous questions. Although, as two respondents suggest, the question may have appeared ambiguous, it is also likely that individual reasons for rejecting a particular course are much more complex and respondents’ answers reveal the interaction of a number of choice factors.

These figures show that respondents have considered course costs (including the additional costs of books and course attendance) as the most significant final choice factor. This is followed by a dislike of the residential element, with seven females giving this as their most negative element and a further three as the second most negative factor. Concern over time demands and the possibility that a course may be inappropriate is spread throughout the rankings, and comments suggest that there is anxiety about what the hidden course costs might be as well as the need for an academic and administrative staff “hotline” to reassure doubters during a recruitment period.

The lack of help from course information and course personnel is not seen as a negative factor, although specific course rejection may have depended on student experience of an individual institution. The lack of financial help and other support from the respondent’s own institution is clearly a factor in reaching final decisions but, in making a choice between courses, it is less significant.
Lack of help from course
Poor course information
Additional costs
Cost too high
Inappropriate
Too much work
Lack of support from own
institution
Additional costs
Poor course information
Lack of help from course personnel

as a factor – open comments indicate that respondents often begin the process of selection on the assumption that there will not be institutional financial support.

Other reasons for rejecting particular courses include personal worries that it would be difficult to cope with study demands. Although research indicates that distance students are generally “more competitive, achievement oriented and assertive” than the general population (Gottert, 1983) and “consider themselves independent and capable... quite a few distance students who seem to doubt their ability to cope” (Holmberg, 1995, pp. 13-14). Several students say they reject courses because they offer insufficient student control over workload.

Course rejection is also often related to the perceived reputation of the provider as expressed through networks with colleagues and the educational press. In addition, courses are also rejected because little information is provided about tutors and their professional reputation, and it may be that the materials provided should reflect the status and validation procedures, past successes and academic credibility of courses. Concerns about the tutor-student relationship do, however, reflect an apparent paradox in student attitudes. While information about tutor expertise and experience is seen as an important issue for many potential students, once on-course there appears to be a reticence in approaching tutors to utilize that expertise:

Many learners have attitudes towards knowledge and towards “educated” individuals which minimize the potentiality of dialogue. One of the most common statements from learners about their hesitancy in talking to tutors was that their problem was not worthy of their tutor’s attention, and they were unwilling to take up their tutor’s time (Haughey, 1991, p. 20)

Higher education: learning lessons?

Judging by those responding to the questionnaires, opportunities provided by distance-learning programmes are increasingly tempting to potential students, supporting both national and international trends. Daniel (1993) comments on its particular suitability as a support for the learning needs of teachers:

Distance education has proved to be the best method for equipping teachers not simply to cope with changes, but to embrace them with enthusiasm... in the United Kingdom it is now helping teachers to make the transition to the new national curriculum.

Of the 60 respondents to the Keele survey, 25 had opted for distance education courses at various institutions, with a further nine indicating that they would have begun a course if financial support had been available. Course rejection by potential students appears to be related most closely to cost and, of the 60, only 11 had gained the promise of any form of financial support from their institution or LEA. In addition, two potential students pointed to the importance of linked flexible learning issues – first, the notion of “prior accreditation” of learning and experience contributing to an award and, second, the need for ongoing course responsiveness and flexibility to allow students to complete their course.

As the vanguard distance-learning institution in the UK, the Open University’s reputation for excellence rests on an approach which “creates high-quality learning by building on student commitment, high-quality tutoring, and summer schools to bring students together” (NCE, 1993, p. 94). However, this approach may, in future, be superseded (some might say threatened) by recent developments in some parts of higher education – in both old and new universities – which emphasize low-cost provision, little or no face-to-face tutoring and little or no residential experience.

This new modus vivendi appears to be at least initially successful with hard-pressed teachers and education managers confronted with the need for greater pragmatism with regard to their own professional development. Highly pressured professional lives, when combined with low-pay relativities (NUT, 1993) and virtually no possibility of external funding support, pushes potential students towards award-bearing opportunities which offer low tuition costs and limited time/study demands.
Overall, the Keele survey data indicate that, of the range of key issues, costs and contacts are significant concerns leading teachers and other educators in deciding distance education provision to focus on opportunities which allow them to minimize costs while maximizing “value for money”; minimize attendance and “contact” while maximizing quality materials and independent learning. The increasing market orientation of education and the growing emphasis on distance education supported by a rapidly expanding range of media technologies offer the prospect of increased award-bearing professional development opportunities for teachers and other educators, but in doing so also hold the prospect of limited face-to-face interactions.

The results of the survey indicate that, for higher education institutions, the way to increased course recruitment seems to be via minimum-cost provision and the development of new interactive technologies as a cost-effective alternative to formal teaching (Tucker, 1989). This, in turn, may mean that course providers need to tempt potential students with easy-installment payments and minimal “add-on” course-related costs.

The effect of the new funding scenario reliant on individuals writing their own development as the most important choice factor is now being seen across the HE sector, with some institutions moving towards “total” distance-learning packages, offering flexible completion dates within a set period, no requirement for residential experience, and either no formal tutor contact or tutorial support only by telephone/fax. While it may meet potential student demand, this development does not, however, altogether easily reconcile the thorny issues of “academic excellence”, “quality assurance” and the real “student experience”.

As many institutions are tempted to “go to market”, maximizing their client base by producing materials-based, distance-education courses and allowing tutor support to become genuinely distanced (or even invisible), follow-on assessment is also likely to become an “arm’s length” activity - work-based, report-focused, with a strong emphasis on “competence”. Ironically, however, with limited student-tutor interaction, the academic evaluation of student progress is potentially endangered and may begin to be a paper exercise - at its worst validating what the student (or his/her own manager, mentor or supervisor) tells you is happening or has happened.

As increasing numbers of universities begin to adopt distance learning as a deliberate course delivery strategy in an endeavour to make programmes more work-related, competence-based and linked to professional practice through the National Vocational Qualification framework, student concerns over the quality and value for money issues, as well as the nature of the student experience, appear to be becoming increasingly important. At the institutional level, teaching and research quality; the nature of assessment processes and the overall value of the academic experience are also increasingly stressed through the attention paid to them by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC).

Beyond the immediate and short-term gains of participating in an expanding distance-learning market, continued student success and course or institutional credibility rests on the resolution of fundamental and longer-term quality issues. However, a transparent framework with agreed parameters for “non-traditional” forms of teaching and learning can only aid the development of quality-driven, yet diverse provision. Perhaps as a first step, a comprehensive national database, with specific categories of information, which allows potential students to compare course elements and institutions across a range of measures may eventually lead to the possibility of “kite-marked” provision which meets clear and nationally agreed “quality” criteria.

References and further reading


Sue Law

Learning lessons: why choose distance learning in education management?

International Journal of Educational Management


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