

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 3 of the book,
Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning
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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author.

Managing change for sustainability

Case study 1

Moving to flexible delivery at the University of South Australia

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Until 2001, the University of South Australia (UniSA) was a conventional dual mode distance education provider. While the majority of students attended on-campus, there was a small but significant group of distance students (about 16% of the total enrolment), generally taught by academics who were working concurrently with both on and off-campus students in the same courses. Content and assessment requirements were the same, but there were special resources provided for distance study, and systemic forms of support provided for all aspects of the distance student's engagement with the institution, organised through a dedicated External Students' Centre¹. Distance students rarely attended on campus and almost never were required to do so. The success of the institution's distance provision was such that it was designated one of eight National Distance Education Centres by the Commonwealth Government in the 1980's, although it was a considerably smaller operation than the others.

In 2001, the decision was taken to mainstream provision for distance students as part of a movement within UniSA to increase flexibility for all students. In this, the resources of sophisticated online platform were made available to any student to add value to existing offerings and services. This was part of a long-standing commitment to create a different learning environment for students that was more student-centred and directed towards achieving a set of identified capabilities in all graduates that went beyond conventional disciplinary expertise. Student-centred learning was conceived as involving both an increase in choices available to students about different aspects of their study program and also an invitation to assume more responsibility for managing their own learning. The capabilities pursued through teaching and learning arrangements involved key attitudes and attributes sought by employers and the professions, as well as value positions on the role of the professional and citizen adopted by the University in an agreed set of Graduate Qualities.

The critical enabling dimension of the University's strategy was to move to flexible delivery of all programs, by which was meant:

The provision of resources and the application of technologies to create, store and distribute program content, enrich communication, and provide support and services to enable both more effective learning and

¹ In this paper, 'distance education', 'external studies' and 'off-campus studies' are used synonymously.

better management of learning by the learner. (King, 1999)

It was considered that neither student centred learning, nor achievement of the desired Graduate Qualities, would be possible if teaching and learning was not organised in ways that afforded students the opportunity to take decisions, practise exercising responsibility, and demonstrate the capabilities sought. An argument ran: if we are trying to provide these opportunities for students generally, and supporting them with a range of online and other resources, then how do we justify a separate form of provision for external students? Surely, the convenience they seek, the resources they rely upon, and their freedom from the constraints of time and place in study should be our intention for all?

Some of the decisions taken at that time were:

- to disestablish the External Students' Centre and mainstream support for distance students within a unit known as Campus Central, that provided administrative support for on-campus students,
- to move to online resources as the base provision for other than face to face study and to foster independence from formal commitments where possible,
- to expand the range of study support resources available to all students online and around the clock,
- to provide greater support for academic staff by creating the role of online adviser – diverting resources and expertise from former editor and desk-top publishing positions in the Distance Education Centre – such that those wishing to add online resources to their teaching could get personal assistance if required,
- to withdraw production services for print-based learning resources and pass development for these to academic staff, with guidance provided through templates and professional development,
- to maintain a central learning resource dispatch operation, and
- to bring all forms support for staff and students in relation to the academic program into a central unit, the Flexible Learning Centre, which subsequently established 'one-stop-shop' service provision on each campus, called Learning Connection. Purely administrative assistance, eg payment of library fines or changing enrolment, was provided through a similar, but separate entity, Campus Central. Only the Library, because of its size, remained outside this arrangement.

As a consequence, the overall learning environment of the University has the following characteristics²:

- Every program and every course has a home-page with course-specific resources on it.
- Over 1200 courses, on and off-campus, have substantial online study resources.
- All students and staff –about 37,000 persons – have an email account on the same system.
- All students can access a comprehensive range of online study support at any time of night or day, all year round, from any location with web-access.
- All students enroll down to the level of tutorial groups online. In the first year of this system, 77% of continuing and 40% of new students enrolled online from off-campus. About 80% of students overall took advantage of this capacity in the second year of operation and enrolment time averaged half an hour per person.

² This material was first introduced in King (2003).

- All students can access any information the University holds about them online, from registration details to exam results, to overdue library books and parking fines.
- Any student can submit an assignment electronically from anywhere in the World and have its submission acknowledged automatically.
- Our career service is almost totally online and averages about 3,000 hits per week.
- UniSAnet, our online teaching and learning environment, averages more than 20 million hits per month. The University of South Australia website is one of the most visited educational website of any kind in Australia.

From one perspective, this looks like an active and very modern distance education operation, but it is worth remembering the relatively small proportion of distance students within the total student population. What is described above applies to all. There are two consequences of this development. First, what were previously the distinctive elements of our distance education operation have been mainstreamed into services that add value for all, regardless of where and when students study. Second, there is a very real possibility that bona fide distance students³ are losing out in this environment. I want to elaborate on this second point. Has the University thrown the baby out with the bathwater?

When the decision was announced that the External Students' Centre (ESC) was closing some students expressed frustration and disappointment. How much this was fostered by affected staff is unclear, although it is evident that some enlisted student support to argue against the proposed change. Second, there has been a real loss of expertise in the mainstreaming exercise, simply because the single focus – and accumulated expertise - of the (ESC) staff has been absorbed in a larger commitment to all students. Third, external students are no longer a specific priority for administrative action and while this matters less as the University has moved from post to email for communication, the logistics of engagement with the institution can still be cumbersome for those who never attend on-campus. Fourth, a degree of empathy with the learning milieu of distance students has probably been lost, even where they are treated with courtesy and friendliness by Campus Central staff. Fifth, although the Flexible Learning Centre maintains a dispatch operation for study materials sent to distance students – and staff there deal regularly with them by phone - a number of smaller programs choose not to use this service. The arguments advanced for independent action are largely spurious; what underpins this decision is a desire to avoid proper scheduling or drawing late dispatches to the attention of the University management. Finally, students who were previously provided with informed advice centrally now tend to seek information from individual academic staff, and email gives them greater capacity to do so. This sometimes leads to frustration and expressions of resentment from those lecturers who feel overwhelmed by high student to staff ratios and sometimes harassed by those students who want immediate answers to their questions. Clearly, from the perspective of distance students, service levels have fallen. This is probably so.

Initially, this was seen as a transition problem; something students would adjust to over time. However, the near monopoly of distance provision by UniSA has been seriously challenged by the other two universities in South Australia, both of

³ Here I am making a distinction between students who take all their program off-campus and others who are principally on-campus but elect to take one or more course through the distance education operation for convenience, eg to overcome time-table clashes, conflicts with other family or work commitments, etc. The latter group is growing rapidly as more flexible delivery approaches are adopted.

whom increased their distance enrolments by about 50% in 2003, largely by introducing new Graduate Certificate programs in the high demand area of Health Sciences. Although distance student numbers at UniSA have remained stable, its competitors have expanded the pool of external students in the highly contested domestic market. The issue for the University of South Australia is how it can promote its own distance programs without an adequate infrastructure to meet new students' needs. This may involve a new position. While a reversion to past practice is unlikely, new arrangements that build on the model of flexible delivery for all, but give greater recognition to the specific circumstances of those who don't attend on campus may have to be developed.