The recent history of Southern Cross University as a new university in Northern New South Wales (Klich, 1999), has been one of rapid growth in programs and student numbers. Innovative developments and growth in flexible delivery and collaborative industry programs, many off-campus and off-shore, have increased enrolments dramatically to where almost half the students are external to the university.

Our distance education students are studying in undergraduate and postgraduate award and non-award programs in every Australian State and overseas. They may be in the Defence Forces, they may be working for major companies, be self-employed or unemployed, and some may need to study in several locations or countries in one year. They need not be physically remote but are often people with work or family commitments who find the travel time to attend local courses too great if the remote course will be as effective. They are often the more valued employees who never considered that they could take the time needed for regular courses (Turoff, 1997).

The use of new Information Technologies (IT) has created a different educational paradigm with greater flexibility in teaching and student-driven learning. IT has major strategic importance in the competitiveness and development of universities, and use of IT can be seen as an enabling mechanism for enhancing flexibility in teaching and learning arrangements (Nunan, 1999). The new technologies have brought a global meaning to education by removing access boundaries and allowing students to study regardless of their geographic location or nationality.

Southern Cross University values and promotes its ability to respond to existing market demands for new offerings and to deliver services for emerging markets. This flexibility has enabled the University to develop an impressive range of partnership arrangements with growing industries such as tourism, retail, health and human services, with private providers, and with business and international partners (Klich, 1999). Perhaps as a function of its size, Southern Cross has also maintained a strong commitment to personalised service for its students, wherever they may be located.

Southern Cross is committed to the use of IT to further develop its distance and international market by providing a flexible online mode of study that enhances the quality of teaching materials and learning experiences. The DETYA report on Educational Technology in Higher Education (March 1998) argued the benefits of technology on the quality of teaching as being:

- ability to use multi media resources as means to demonstrate or explain difficult concepts;
- ability to provide simulation of real life experience in vocational training;
- new information and search methods;
- more innovative teacher student interactions;
- attention of students teachers and institutions is focused on the way learning happens (by asking this strategic question as part of the process of developing innovative approaches to IT assisted learning, it challenges and enhances what we know about the learning process thereby having benefits across the board within a learning and research environment);
- allows for more collaborative learning between staff and students in an environment that is not physically restricted to the classroom; and allows for greater and more immediate feedback to students.
With the key objectives to provide a greater quality learning experience for our external students, and to broaden the external market to include all parts of the world, the decision to develop designed specifically for online courses established a new direction in the university. These initiatives have had strong corporate commitment to the process: the funding is provided centrally, accountability is through boards of stakeholders, and there is a common project management methodology. Such a coordinated approach to technical development is still quite unusual in Australian universities but is proving to be a very effective means of ensuring that the developments are appropriately resourced, well supported and of a high standard.

Southern Cross University currently has four major online projects of this kind:

- Paralegal Online: the online development of the Associate Degree in Law (Paralegal Studies) in the School of Law and Justice;
- SaWD Online: the online development of elements of the Bachelor of Social Science, as part of collaborative professional development and industry-related programs in the School of Social and Workplace Development;
- Emergency Management Online: the development of a new post-graduate degree in the School of Human Services to link community development with emergency and disaster management, using United States and United Nations materials to provide an internationally recognised program for delivery in Australia and Asia;
- BBA Online: The online development of a globally offered Bachelor of Business Administration degree, where students in different countries will be able to interact with instructors in Australia and their fellow students in other countries.

In moving existing courses into this online mode, each unit of study was redesigned from first principles, and the use of skilled instructional design academic staff has been essential in this process. The initiative is about harnessing the full learning and instructional potential of these new technologies rather than about replacing one delivery technology with another. The university has adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to unit development with Project Managers overseeing teams of instructional designers, technicians and content developers (usually academics).

During 1999 Law and SaWD delivered online units to small pilot groups of students, and much has been learnt from this experience. Whilst the use of technology allows for innovative learning experiences which are often not feasible or imaginable using traditional teaching methods, if innovative approaches are not supported by corresponding changes in academic work practices, institutional policy and administrative procedures, then the potential benefits of the new technology may often not be fulfilled. This is a major area of concern and importance for the development of online courses and resources.

To fully utilise the benefits of online learning everyone involved needs to think beyond traditional conceptual, pedagogical, and design boundaries and existing work practices. Academics need to embrace the possibilities for new forms of interactive learning that the technology provides which may be learner rather than teacher-driven. The introduction of innovative learning methods such as on-line can increase the burden on teaching and support staff, and the allocation of financial and human resources by academic and administrative managers to support online learning needs to be based on thorough assessment of online learning practices and their realistic time requirements, rather than on established allocations (Putterill, 1999).
One of the main challenges is a conceptual one to ensure that institutions offering distance education and those students accessing it clearly perceive it as different from but equal in value with traditional on-campus teaching and learning. Turoff believes that well planned and flexibly designed electronic distance education can offer the student a superior learning experience. If electronic teaching methods are considered to be one of the equal value options for on- and off-campus students, then such artificial boundary issues become increasingly blurred, students may choose flexible delivery options that best suit their individual circumstances, and such new developments represent added value and a wider range of high quality choices for all students. The use of multi-disciplinary design and delivery teams can greatly assist in such boundary spanning activities.

Southern Cross University is committed to further development of these new and innovative programs and delivery methods. For the University, the online projects are a valuable investment in being able to provide a better range of flexible learning options for all our students, they provide the potential to reach more students who for various reasons may be otherwise denied access or may simply prefer online learning, and they provide exciting opportunities to push beyond existing boundaries of instructional design and increase levels of effective student engagement with high quality learning resources, whether human or electronic.

REFERENCES


(authors names omitted from this review copy)

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