Staying Relevant and Current with Online Learning in an Increasingly Global and Competitive Environment

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Abstract—This presentation outlines the success of online learning in the workplace with corporate partners through Open Universities Australia (OUA). OUA is recognized as the national leader in online higher education in Australia with over 200,000 students studying with OUA since 1993. The corporate program helps employees formalize or extend their current skills, reach the next level in their organization or pursue relevant interests through tertiary studies. The business sector sees OUA as a highly attractive solution to fostering a culture of professional development, engagement and inclusiveness.

Index Terms—corporate education, leader online learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the United States the number of enrolled students taking at least one online course is growing at ten times the rate of the overall higher education population which is undoubtedly the reason that online teaching is seen as a core strategy for over 65\% of American Chief Academic Officers \(^1\). Students are demanding some component of their program being delivered online whether it is one module, one subject, one unit or the complete degree. They wish to spend less time on campus and are insisting upon higher quality online engagement. The opportunities for online learning span across borders as students can enroll and study online regardless of their location or where the institution physically exists.

In Australia the growth pattern is similar with online enrolments increasing by 29% compared to an on-campus growth rate of 5% in 2010 \(^2\). While online enrolments are also increasing in Canada, the growth rate is lower than in the US and Australia \(^3\). One possible reason for this growth in online education is in response to nations setting targets to significantly increase the percentage of their populations holding degree level qualifications. Since there is limited space available on campus the only way to achieve targets is through online education. As an example, the United States government has set a target of 58 to 60\% of 25 to 34 year olds to hold a degree level qualification by 2020, up from 39\% in 2009 \(^4\). In Australia the government has set a more modest target of 40\% but that is from a base of 29\% in 2009. Fig. 1 provides a comparison of percentages in 2009 and targets for 2020 for both the United States and Australia.

Figure 1. Percentage of 25-34 year olds with degree-level qualifications

Other factors having an impact and/or influence on the increased demand for online education are:

- a global trend for a more educated society as productivity gains and technological advances reduce the need for skilled labor;
- difficult economic times which usually sees an increase in demand for education as the job market becomes more competitive, putting the onus on individuals to upskill and achieve higher levels of educational qualifications;
- advancements in technology that support online learning providing greater access, reliability, enhanced experiences and reduced costs; and
- improved quality and acceptance of online learning as legitimate as on campus study \(^5\).

Regardless of the factor the reality is that students are no longer constrained by an inflexible model of education where they must choose from a limited number of courses, as well as at a particular time and place according to the institution.

In an increasingly global and competitive environment, staying relevant and current in the marketplace is important for both employees and employers. As illustrated in Fig. 2 over 50\% of students are studying online due to work commitments while 30\% prefer an online mode of study \(^6\). Thus, corporations are turning to online learning to provide employees with access to higher education in order to complement retention strategies, improve employee productivity, strengthen employee benefits portfolio and set them apart as an

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employer of choice. An educated and skilled workforce is required in this rapidly changing technological world.

Leveraging off its success as the Australian national leader in online learning in the higher education field, Open Universities Australia (OUA), is extending its reach into the corporate sector. Since 1993 OUA has grown into a consortium of 20 Australian educational institutions and professional associations. In 2012 annual unit enrolments are expected to reach 200,000 with revenues in excess of $150 million.

II. CORPORATE EDUCATION

While the corporate initiative at OUA only began in 2010 there are at present over 30 corporate partners whose employees have access to more than 1800 units of study and 180 qualifications. The primary mission of corporate partnerships is to expand access to higher education in Australia to include under-represented groups, working adults as well as students in regional and remote areas. For OUA the corporate initiative not only reinforces the relevance of the units, programs and partner universities, but also provides insight to inform and address the future needs of the industry.

A large portion of OUA students are working adults seeking the liberty to study where and when it suits them. Through the corporate channel OUA extends the same advantage of convenience and flexibility to both employer and employee – developing the skills and knowledge required. For industry a key benefit is retention and transition of staff for greater talent engagement and management. As is evident in Table I, the corporate enrolment numbers have increased 20% from 2010 to 2011 and are projected to more than double in 2012.

TABLE I.
OUA CORPORATE AND INTERNATIONAL ENROLMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolment Type</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>1402</td>
<td>1682</td>
<td>840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>4447</td>
<td>4969</td>
<td>2251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5849</td>
<td>6651</td>
<td>3091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note only first quarter of a four quarter enrollment period.

The most popular programs that corporate employees are undertaking include: education, economics, law, financial planning, business management, accounting, statistics, health, information technology and science. In Table II a snapshot of the enrolments by corporate sectors for the first quarter of 2012 is provided showing the largest sectors as banking, government and sport.

FIGURE 2. REASONS FOR STUDYING ONLINE

For example in 2011 one corporate partner, the National Bank of Australia had a total of 103 employees enrolled in 210 units (courses). As of March 2012, OUA had already received a total of 170 enrolments from just 71 employees. While this growth may in part be due to forecasted financial job losses it is obvious that banking employers and employees are looking to retrain or transition to alternative roles.

As evidence of how the OUA corporate initiative is gaining recognition a recently displaced bank employee applied for a new role with one of the large insurance companies and after a positive interview was asked for questions. The candidate queried the interviewer as to what was offered in the way of professional development opportunities as his previous employer had an educational arrangement with Open Universities Australia. The interviewer asked “would that really get you over the line with the role?” to which the candidate replied “it would actually, my previous employer had a host of options in place and I was hoping you would have something similar [7].” Since then the insurance company has become a corporate partner with OUA.

Another corporate partner with growing enrolments is the Australian Defence Force. The partnership with OUA provides tertiary and higher education opportunities to Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel, Defence Australia Public Service employees, partners and family members. The Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Defence Personnel gave as the rationale for this partnership the opportunity for Defence personnel and partners to continue their education regardless of global postings.

To further illustrate the breadth of corporate partners is the relationship OUA has with several elite and amateur sporting associations in Australia. The positive effects of education and off-field interests on playing performance and career duration have been detailed in a recent Australian Sports Commission and Australian Institute of Sport Study. This study of 143 elite athletes found that 72% thought their sporting performance had benefited from them undertaking education or employment during their sporting careers [8]. The life of a professional athlete is one of constant transition due to travel, team changes,
injuries and life after sport. “The OUA flexible study model is perfect for accommodating the ever changing lifestyle of the professional athlete [9].”

OUA students are very diverse with age ranges from 13 to 94 with the greatest concentration in the 25 to 39 age brackets. Table III illustrates the percentage distribution by age group for students in on campus traditional universities in Australia, OUA students and corporate students. As can be determined the distribution is very even for both corporate students and regular OUA students. Traditional universities are seeing online education as a market opportunity to expand their demographic reach by offering a great variety of courses and programs online.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>OUA</th>
<th>Corporate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 – 24</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 – 29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 – 39</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 – 49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note this refers to students on campus in traditional universities

It is important to note that through OUA students can attain a qualification from the university which they study that is identical to one awarded to an on-campus student. These internationally recognized courses and programs provide graduates a competitive edge in the marketplace. Online education with four study periods in each academic year enables employees to fast track their qualifications. In addition, there are no entry requirements for most undergraduate units so employees who went directly into the workforce from high school are not disadvantaged when they choose to return to study. Many employees are looking to formalize qualifications in areas in which they currently work or for roles they have grown into in order to solidify their positions and employment status.

Business clients often take advantage of OUA benefits including:

- Priority enrolment
- Textbook vouchers
- Enrolment Advisors to match career aspirations with a study plan
- Student enrolment advice, counseling, library services, preparatory units and online tutorial support to help gain necessary academic skills such as writing, referencing, researching and critical thinking.
- No entry requirements for most undergraduate units
- Ideal higher-education solutions solution for geographically spread organizations
- Highly attractive government loan scheme for self-funded individuals

III. CENTRE FOR ONLINE LEARNING EXCELLENCE

A recent US report prepared for the Department of Education reviewed more than a thousand empirical studies of online learning and “found that on average, students in online learning conditions performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction [10].” Although these results will be contentious for many academics the fact is online learning has and continues to gain credibility as an accepted and demanded mode of learning.

The flexibility of learning within a course or program is also being extended to a wider learning experience, with students mixing and matching on campus, online, intensive mode, etc. This places an additional challenge of maintaining quality across different modes and institutions. Since students have increasing control over how and when they learn institutions must be flexible in responding to students’ demands.

As technology improves at a pace, and educational material saturates the internet, the challenge is no longer access to content but rather more about quality of learning through choices, learning design, creativity and innovation. As the Vice Chancellor of Open University in the United Kingdom, Martin Bean states “it is the capacity of technology to create access to education that is the most compelling [11].”

The overarching challenge in this current climate is quality of the learning experiences for the students, the quality of staff and the quality of the courses. Any online organization will only survive and thrive if it offers the best courses, from the best institutions, supported by the best staff.

Quality then is the primary driver for OUA in establishing the Centre for Online Learning Excellence (COLE) focusing on high quality learning engagement to improve student retention, satisfaction and progression. The three main areas for COLE are Research and Innovation, Strategic Initiatives and Professional Services. Evidence based research by COLE makes its way into the design and development of learning experiences and materials from proven methodologies and analytics. It is this collection and analysis of information about learners and their contexts that informs the development of those environments [12].

COLE also provides advice on how best to teach online and how best to engage students with different technological tools and platforms informed from applied research and innovation. As well the professional services area assists staff and institutions with learning design, resource and multimedia design and production and professional development. Thus there are times when COLE is best placed to coordinate and manage a solution to common problems faced by institutions such as development of diagnostic and intervention tools and strategies for students.

Going forward institutions need to turn their attention to the design of learning and engagement of students that are dispersed by borders whether by suburb, state or country. Educators will be expected to have broader skills and will be held to higher standards of excellence in the effective use of technology for online delivery regardless of the nature and type of student – undergraduate, postgraduate or corporate.
IV. CONCLUSION

Online education has enabled much greater learner participation and the trend will continue. Students who were unable or unlikely to take up tertiary education now have opportunities that in the past were inconceivable. Mid-career and people with significant work commitments, those with family responsibilities, those with disabilities and the many who live in regional and remote locations or communities that cannot sustain a physical higher education institution can now enroll in courses and programs from leading universities without major upheaval or disruption to their lives. The needs and demands for workplace learning is increasing and online education seems to provide what both employers and employees desire.

To quote Trevor O’Hoy, former Chief Executive Officer of SABMiller (Fosters) – “Technology is clearly the way of the future. Technology offers new ways to communicate and it’s terrific that Open Universities Australia is doing great things with technology in the education space.” [13]

REFERENCES

AUTHORS

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