

Flexible delivery: on-line versus bottom-line

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ABSTRACT

Objective

In using a flexible delivery of learning approach to nursing education, and taking into account the globalisation of education, this research argues that universities need to consider and take into account both the positive and negative aspects of this decision.

Setting

Tertiary educational settings

Subjects

All undergraduate/postgraduate students

Primary Argument

As nursing education is undergoing some significant changes this study argues that universities must be prepared to adopt some changes to harmonise with the needs of learners, the major stakeholders and to remain financially competitive in the marketplace.

Conclusion

These arguments need to be considered using the backdrop of what might be described as the globalisation of education and universities need to respond to the challenges that flexible online learning presents. Flexible delivery for nursing education may need to proceed forward with a degree of caution because financial considerations shouldn't be a determinant of pedagogical quality.

INTRODUCTION

Education is not static; learner and teacher diversities co-exist in a technologically evolving environmental society making it impossible for education to remain a stable and unchanging pedagogical entity (Brown et al 2008; Dixon et al 2005). Contemporary adult education sits in a fast paced, high speed era where there is no clear demarcation between distance education and traditional learning modes which can make it difficult for both the teacher/facilitator and the learner (Spitzer and Perrenoud 2006). Moreover, the notion of distance education often conjures a crude intermixed version of the contemporary offerings of both flexible and online formats (Burd and Buchanon 2005; Hudson 2003). Adult education has become a commodity and as such must incorporate the needs of the students whilst maintaining cost effectiveness (Nelson 2008). Clearly, the needs of the students are often subjugated at the hands of the purse strings with financial considerations overriding good teaching practice. Flexible or multi-modal delivery is commonplace across university curricula these days and this paper seeks to consider some of the modes and adapted content changes which this new style entails. Online or e-centred learning is considered with regard to its role with increasing flexibility for contemporary adult learners and accepts changing pedagogies and the incorporation of a range of generational learning packages now on offer and also a myriad of changing multigenerational nursing student demographics (Stanley 2010). Across this broad spectrum this paper examines some of the advantages and disadvantages of flexible and online delivery from both the learner and teacher perspectives within the context of tertiary nurse education in some university settings.

CONTEXT OF LEARNING

Nursing education in Australia has undergone much change, the value of which is currently the subject of much government and public debate (Warelow and Edward 2009; O'Keefe and Armitage 2007). In 1984, the Commonwealth Government initiated a staggered nationwide abandonment of the apprentice model of nurse training and replaced it with what is often seen as the formalised, even legitimised educational package delivered within the tertiary sector (Holmes 2005). These reforms were in-line with global changes, and in response to nursing labour shortages which are still occurring and a general dissatisfaction with learning outcomes from the then apprentice model of training (DEST 2006; Koh 2002; Stanwick and Humphries 1995). One of the major complaints about the 'block' delivery of hospital based nurse training was that it failed to integrate well the theory with practice (Gassner et al 1999) and placed the discipline of nursing outside of the university setting of which all the other disciplines were party. As a sequel to this entry into the tertiary sector more recent national reviews of nursing education, among other literature findings (Blackman et al 2007), shows that the level of clinical competence at degree completion for nursing is seen as concerning (in DEST 2006). The challenge for nurse educators therefore is to ensure that fundamental clinical skills are transferred from the realm of theory to practice in order to address the market demand for 'work ready' nurses. That said, the ability of graduate nurses to integrate theory into practice has been an ongoing issue in nursing for decades (Morgan 2006). This 'hit the ground running' philosophy seems at odds with the caring and compassionate ideals which are paraded within the foundational rhetoric of nursing and is often used as a 'catch cry' in advertisements from both the university sector and graduate hospitals in their recruitment of potential applicants. The university system contends that the graduate year allows students to consolidate their theoretical skills in a supportive environment and gives graduates the opportunity to apply their skills to practice and the dilemma here is that there is only really one day between being a student (where one can ask) and being a registered nurse (where one has to answer) and this application has therefore a myriad of individual and institutional obstacles. Clearly, on-line learning can teach facts but the provision of nursing skills is of course in the application and delivery, which is usually learnt by watching, mirroring and doing with others. The movement away from face to face teaching and learning by flexible delivery can therefore be problematical here.

PATHWAYS

Many universities address some of these educational issues by increasing the availability of their courses to those learners who may not have previously considered or undertaken tertiary education by providing a mentorship role within their programs to support new applicants. Many sites create multiple study pathways which widen the available scope and options of prospective applicants and also allows for multiple exit levels (Ellis and Hartley 2004). These multiple delivery pathways are a workable example of tertiary institutions endeavouring to address the pathway options but also by doing this, address labour shortages in nursing by providing recognition of prior learning (RPL) status or advanced standing and pre-graduate exiting qualifications and opening up labour recruitment and retention issues (DEST 2001). The changing demographics of the learner and their location to the academic facility are also encompassed with flexible delivery options. Similarly, a learner's previous experience and knowledge are encouraged and valued, meaning that students do not have to be assessed on content where they have already demonstrated their competence. Adult learners appreciate this recognition as the length of the course is decreased as is the financial cost and this process is overseen by registering authorities. Offering advanced standing has additional benefits for the university as it in many ways attracts students to enrol with them. Mekwa (2000) argues however, that the use of RPL is not without contention. There can be a considerable variation of standardised content delivery and assessment practices across the registered training organisations where learners have attained their original qualification. These inequalities make moderation of applications difficult and can result in an uneven distribution of fail grades for written pieces of work amongst learners. Those students can be admitted to university courses and not be successful in their studies as their presumed existing knowledge is not up to the required entry or competency standards. These failures exact an emotional and financial cost to the learner and can be quite significant with the university reputation affected negatively and ultimately the funding threatened and the potential for the brand being damaged. Clearly, a pecuniary consideration over pedagogical quality is problematic.

Offering a flexible structure of delivery is of benefit to students who for whatever reason are opting out of study or who wish to convert existing credit points into a qualification; learners can gain a lesser qualification prior to completing the bachelor of nursing degree (DEST 2001). Many university students gain an assistant in nursing (AIN) qualification after one year of study, and an enrolled nurse qualification after three semesters or two years of study (depending on the university/location) (DEST 2001; Gibbs 1999), although these will change under the newly formed regulatory authority. This provided the learners with an opportunity to gain employment in the field they are studying thus negating some aspects of the theory – practice gap (Gassner et al 1999). For those students who are unable to commit to further study, the provision of multiple exit levels ensures their time of study has produced a useful vocational qualification and can be built on if they choose at a later date (DEST 2001).

The use of technology (specifically the internet) has had an enormous impact on being able to offer flexible delivery at many tertiary sites (University of Ballarat 2009; Nelson 2008; University of Queensland 1999). Many authors make the clarification that flexible delivery does not necessarily equate with the use of technology (Jeffries 2003; Evans and Smith 1999; Misko 1994). Interestingly, Nelson (2008) posits that most online learning environments can actually be quite inflexible to student needs when offering rigid assessments and learning outcomes that are teacher centred or when broadband options are required for sending large mega-pixel DVD clips across distance to country students. The use of technology however, can be a worthy complimentary adjunct when delivering flexible teaching (Dixon et al 2005). The adjunct should be complimentary to the program rather than instead of.

In many sites nursing lectures no longer require compulsory attendance. Providers of education are beginning to understand that students require, indeed demand, this increased flexibility in attendance and still be able to maintain the role of being a learner (Dixon et al 2005; University of Queensland 1999). Lectures are presented in multi-modal formats; face to face, podcast, streaming and via elluminate live. This is obviously a significant shift from the more didactic 'chalk and talk' methods which many lecturers have difficulty moving away from. Students who are unable to physically attend lectures can still receive all of the information provided to the students who attend lectures (University of Ballarat 2009; SCU 2006). An appreciation of the learner's needs which appears to be advanced by a flexible learning pedagogy is required with many learners needing to fulfil the multiple roles of full-time student, parent and paid employee or care giver (Fisher and Baird 2005; Kirton and Greene 2002). All of these roles have pecuniary considerations attached and this appears to be significant across the on-line learning format. By commodifying education and the requirement by the university system to seek full fee paying revenue streams has meant that to balance the books the university sector may have lost some of its educational focus. The fee paying revenue is mostly from international students who despite completing ESOS (Education Services for Overseas Students) requirements add a significant dimension to the classroom setting from both a cultural and educational perspective but who get lost in many ways across any sort of flexible delivery arrangement. Many fee paying students have a range of educational and pastoral considerations mostly to do with translation, articulation and providing the salience of a point in English. This often requires the tuition of both on and off campus materials in a different and often an abridged way. This encourages tuition to be pitched to the mean rather than the top of the intellectual calibre of the group.

On a more positive note and by considering this point from another perspective, the availability of lectures regardless of geographical proximity to the university has created the opportunity for multi-campus; each capable of delivering the same content in real time. This not only potentially boosts student enrolments given the larger catchment area; it also negates student appeals of inequality in content delivery.

CONTENT DELIVERY

Some universities or faculties within universities differ in their core beliefs about how content should be delivered. The very fact that all courses do not deliver the same content in itself increases flexibility for students; widening options for students is an attribute of flexible delivery in terms of increasing learner control (Burd and Buchanon 2004; Evans and Smith 1999). Some universities offer content in a traditional didactic form of teaching whereas competing universities prefer the problem based approach to education. The purpose of this paper is not to weigh into the debate about which pedagogy or teaching style is superior but to acknowledge that these differences exist, serving to provide learner choice and thus flexibility in the method of content delivery.

All students need to have significant skills in self-directed study and time management skills for all forms of learning and this is significant as more university programs are now being delivered on-line and essentially a good part of the course studied at home. This can be especially so for problem based learning programs whereby the lecturer begins to facilitate the student learning and also becomes an active learner themselves. This facilitation rather than teaching role is a direct corollary to flexible learning. Within androgogy theory, content is learner centred and the student attributes of learner responsibility are well placed within problem based learning formats and interestingly are seen as a necessary requirement in flexible and online delivery (Wiesenbergs and Stacey 2005; Waight and Stewart 2005).

ONLINE LEARNING

Technology can play a significant role in flexible learning. The number of complete or partial courses being offered in an online learning format has increased globally over the past decade (Peters 2000). Indeed some universities give online learning such importance they have adapted a strategy where every degree contains at least one completely online unit/course (Taylor 2002). The quality of some online programs being offered is being questioned by some authors with the literature suggesting that if the content is poorly executed, they are of little educational worth (Nelson 2008; Wiesenbergs and Stacey 2005) or value. Furthermore, Kirton and Greene (2002) raise the point that online does not necessarily equate with flexibility. When structured learning times are removed and learners need to self-regulate their time, it is clear that not all students are able to do this successfully. Management of time, study, employment and social life with community engagement responsibilities are not done particularly well by the majority of ex school leavers.

Before considering the positive and negative aspects of online learning, it is important to define, in the context of this paper, what 'online' incorporates. Many tertiary sites are using learning management systems (LMS) such as black board (or Moodle) to assist with the management of materials available to students (University of Ballarat 2009; SCU 2006; Lewinson 2005). These are described as user friendly formats from both learner and teacher perspectives. Within a unit specific site, learners are able to access whatever the teacher wants them to access; this ranges from an entire unit's content or staggered and time-released content delivery. The resources range from PDF files and power point presentations to voice files (in varied formats) and video, YouTube/DVD links. Usually there is an area provided for either formal discussion or learner 'chatting'. The possibilities of presented resources seem only restrained by their availability and teacher capabilities of using the technology. There is also the option for the teacher to monitor student contact hours and to ascertain how much any given student has interacted with the on-line materials.

The title on-line learning does not identify 'learning' as being specifically from the students' perspective intentionally. This term also recognises that educators are required to participate and continually create these online environments, and as such often become the learners also (Burd and Buchanon 2005). Caplan (cited in Wiesenbergs and Stacey 1999) agrees that teachers need to be skilled in information technology and attempt tasks normally undertaken by IT technicians such as a web developer and program designer. Indeed, Burd and Buchanon (2005) concede that up to seven information technology employees should be utilised to successfully plan an online course. Many researchers have acknowledged the need for up-skilling to occur though most discussion is focussed on altered pedagogical strategies specific for online use (Wiesenbergs and Stacey 1999). This need for training could be viewed as a disadvantage of online delivery from a financial perspective although universities are seeing the long term benefits of this investment and, from recent reports Australian universities are willing to spend money in the area of professional online development and online course development (SCU 2006; Taylor 2002). The hidden costs may well be the continued need to update the materials, the need to use evidence-based practice which at first glance would seem a minimal exercise but experience and anecdotal evidence suggests this imposition is significant.

In the literature, online learning is not readily associated with developing clinical skills for nursing. Much of the online technology used in nursing courses has been to deliver core faculty units (broader health units) whilst leaving clinical or practical units to be delivered face to face. A disadvantage of online learning in the case of practical subjects is that it is difficult for the students to gain the practical experience they would get from a clinical skills laboratory (Taylor 2002). Technology allows for the educator to demonstrate a skill with audio and supply written resources – all of which can be downloaded by the student. The problem remains however that the learner is still not in an environment to practice the skill themselves although the use of manikins is now becoming quite commonplace. This is in many ways a financial solution to a quality problem.

Some researchers discuss the value of a blended delivery method to combat these disadvantages (Wiesenbergs and Stacey 2005; Taylor 2002). That is a mixture of face to face and online learning. Teaching course content therefore is considerate of expected learning outcomes and learner needs (Burd and Buchanon 2004). In the context of nursing, this could mean that the theory is delivered online and the practical components remain in a face to face mode. Discussion forums are then utilised for students to have any questions addressed and share experiences. Dixon et al (2005) contend that it is important for students to develop a sense of community and trust in a face to face environment before the expectation of critical discourse online is placed upon them.

The use of discussion boards or rooms varies in their purpose and also the amount they are used (Lewinson 2005). Forums are arranged by the teacher (or facilitator) and students participate to varying degrees. Participation can be linked to an assessment item or can be used to help create a social learner community (Lewinson 2005; Fisher and Baird 2005). Lewinson (2005) contends that this type of discussion forum use is typical when working from a cognitive or social constructivist framework. Garrison et al (2000) argue that online discussion is a useful learning tool as it allows for participation in a purposeful dialogue between learners. Distinct from verbal communication however, online communication allows time for reflection and analysis of the discourse. The use of reflection as a learning tool features strongly in nursing education and is linked with the development of critical thinking skills (Burton 2000). Garrison et al (2000) argues however, that there is not a strong body of empirical evidence to support this notion. Another positive aspect of online discussions is the enhancement of the learning community. Students are less likely to feel disengaged from each other and peer to peer support is common (Dixon et al 2005). Participation however is time consuming and students are likely to become dissatisfied if they experience technical difficulties which is common (Fisher and Baird 2005).

A disadvantage of learning in this text based asynchronous environment however is that the loss of non-verbal cues can interrupt and confuse the message being conveyed leading to misinterpretation of ideas (Garrison et al 2000). It is important in the beginning phase of forum discussion for the facilitator to identify their role which, depending on the purpose of the forum, can either be minimal or equal to that of the learner (SCU 2006). In an attempt to negate potential problems, the facilitator must establish ground rules for appropriate learner participation – this is sometimes referred to as ‘netiquette’ (SCU). Novel terms such as this are being accepted into contemporary language and can be an indication of the large presence of online learning.

Given the high propensity of on-line learning being introduced into under and postgraduate coursework, participation with online learning is to be expected – regardless of learner diversity or preference. It is reasonable to predict that, as with traditional modes of delivery, online learning favours some learners over others (Burd and Buchanon, 2004). Becker et al (2007) consider the culture of online learners and suggest that many older adult learners are not as comfortable using the technology as their younger counterparts. Some of the older learners would consider a course that has a high level of online learning a disadvantage. An advantage of online learning for this learner group is that they tend to be more comfortable with self direction, group work and in sharing personal thoughts (Becker et al 2007; Waight and Stewart 2003). Dixon et al (2005) add that adult learners appreciate the flexibility of asynchronous online learning. Whilst the younger cohort of students may be more computer savvy, their acceptance of participatory group work may be less than their older counterparts; this relates to confidence in their own experience and knowledge.

Nelson (2008) proposes that the potential flexibility offered by the online environment should serve to address the issues of learner diversity. Educators or facilitators can offer learning tools and assessments that accommodate the individual learner’s needs more easily than in a traditional classroom. A study by Becker

et al (2007) shows that despite variable preferred learning styles the generations of baby boomer, X and Y; overall do not significantly influence their preferences for online learning or the associated assessments.

CONCLUSIONS

Education is changing (Dixon et al 2005). Universities must adopt these changes to harmonise with the needs of learners, major stakeholders and to remain competitive in the marketplace (DEST 2006; Kirton and Greene 2002). Globalisation of education has arrived and universities must respond to the challenges that flexible online learning presents (Nelson 2008). Evans and Smith (1993) contend that the provision of flexible delivery should afford increased control for the students with regard to access to subject matter and also, the way and time in which the content is delivered. The use of advanced standing and multi-level exit qualifications provides nursing students with increased study options and are examples of universities being flexible in the mode of delivery (DEST 2001). This flexibility (in part) has the flow on effect of reducing labour shortages. Online learning is growing quickly and whilst some universities have moved more readily than others, there is a general caution to ensure that teachers receive adequate professional development to maximise the possibilities this form of learning has to offer (Taylor 2002) and this may involve a period of transition for the more traditional teachers. Various studies show a general learner acceptance of online delivery and learning and despite some learner diversity and the range of cautious acknowledgement by didactic traditionalists on-line input appears here to stay (Becker et al 2007).

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