

**Title:** DL – the future of Professional Development?

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## Introduction

Universities and colleges make a major contribution to professional development in many fields. In particular, they support initial professional development (IPD) with first degree and certificate courses that address the need for 'mainstream' professional education. They also contribute to continuous professional development (CPD) with more specialist, post-graduate programmes – often in the form of part-time or short courses. In parallel, professional associations provide specialist training for both IPD and CPD purposes – sometimes forming partnerships with universities and colleges to deliver joint programmes that meet the specific needs of the relevant profession.

However, there is evidence that even this level of effort is not meeting professional education and training needs in a number of areas. There are numerous reasons for this but they all stem from three underlying trends:

1. increasing degrees of specialisation in subject matter;
2. broader geographic spread of potential students;
3. timing constraints for student participation.

These are quite separate and independent trends. Interestingly, they all result in the same major issue for educators and trainers – **too few students available at a specific time and place to form a traditional 'face-to-face' class.**

## Increasing specialisation

One of the most powerful drivers for scientific, economic and cultural development is the involvement of ever increasing numbers of people, addressing ever more specialist issues and problems.

This is resulting in an exponential increase in the sum of human knowledge. We have harnessed many new technologies and systems to manage and communicate the information that underpins this knowledge – stimulated by the need for greater convenience, effectiveness and efficiency. However, this expansion of our knowledge base requires more than simply the availability and communication of information. There is, as always, an associated need for tutoring in the understanding and application of that knowledge.

This is not new. What is new is the level of demand for specialist tutoring to cater for the increasing breadth of our knowledge base. But, with increasing specialisation comes a reduction in potential student numbers. The economic basis for face-to-face tutoring is challenged by small class sizes, and the limited number of suitable specialists to act as tutors only compounds this.

## Broader geographic spread

Multiple factors are driving the demand for education and training delivery across wider geographic areas. The most obvious is the increasing importance of education in the developing world. This applies mainly to ‘mainstream’ education at present – but specialist education and training is also required. Within developed countries, other forces are at work:

- students seeking education while remaining close to their work location;
- students wanting to continue their education while on assignment to other locations;
- students temporarily employed abroad;
- increasing government efforts to decentralise and relocate major functions;
- a commercial need to locate customer facing functions closer to clients;
- increasing need for greater staff mobility within firms and other organisations;
- student requirements for greater mobility between employers and locations.

Some professional associations have tackled these problems by partnering with a large number of geographically distributed universities and colleges. Although this approach can work well for mainstream requirements (where there is a substantial demand), it is much less appropriate for specialist areas. Most universities and colleges undertaking more specialist programmes have, at some point, experienced the problems resulting from a shortage of students.

## Timing constraints

On-campus programmes are widely seen (by both students and tutors) as the preferred approach to meeting educational needs. This is particularly true for IPD, where full-time programmes are, generally, most appropriate. However, for many CPD requirements (and in some cases for IPD as well), students do not have the luxury of attending a full-time programme. They must integrate their studies with work and/or other commitments.

In the past, this issue was addressed by evening or part-time classes but, as 24 hour/7day working patterns become more common and shift working becomes more frequent, students in some professions find they cannot attend classes at a fixed time every week. The key requirement here is **flexibility**.

## Delivery issues

A further problem for specialist education and training is ensuring continuity of delivery. In specialist areas there are, inevitably, fewer tutors available. In many cases this means that a face-to-face programme can be dependent on the availability of a particular tutor. If the tutor is ill, the course doesn’t run and, if the tutor moves to another job, the course may well have to be cancelled. This is a major issue for students who are studying to pass professional examinations.

## Flexible Learning

At the heart of all these requirements is the need for greater flexibility in the delivery of education and training for specialist subject areas – particularly for students who, for whatever reason, cannot attend full-time, on-campus programmes.

Flexible learning offers students a choice of learning methods. But this can result in an additional burden for tutors and an additional cost for the educator or trainer. This means that it is often seen as infeasible for specialist education and training.

## Distance Learning

For all the above reasons, it is clear that we must adopt new solutions for the delivery of tutoring in specialist subject areas. We need solutions that are less tutor dependent - in other words 'distancing' the tutor from the student, both in terms of time and location. Note that this 'distancing' does not need to be total. Partial distancing which results in a 'blended learning' approach can also relieve tutors of much of the face-to-face contact needed and allow many more repeats of small-scale programmes. Indeed, in most cases some face-to-face contact is essential – for example, to monitor the development of practical skills or to assess student progress by personal interaction.

Well established 'distance learning' techniques and solutions are available today but initial investment costs have generally restricted their application to mainstream education. How can we harness the power of distance learning techniques to provide more flexible tutoring that can cope with greater degrees of specialisation?

## A solution

If universities, colleges and professional associations are going to meet the demand for specialist education and training in all its forms, a new approach is required. This approach has to encapsulate relevant knowledge into a co-ordinated system that allows for delivery in multiple teaching formats. These must include all relevant technologies – such as published and downloadable materials, e-learning, collaborative learning, etc. Furthermore, the content must be easy to update and, in some cases, easily reproduced in multiple languages.

There are many potential benefits:

- such a 'body of knowledge' represents a major asset for the educator and this is particularly important for relevant professional associations;
- it makes the education and training programmes less tutor dependent and therefore less vulnerable to cancellation or curtailment;
- the content can be formally reviewed by other experts and modified or updated as and when required.

Perhaps the most significant benefit is that it can **improve the quality and consistency of the education or training that is delivered to students.**

Where formal professional qualifications are involved, it can be critically important to be able to guarantee that all topics are covered thoroughly, wherever and however the relevant courses are delivered. This is particularly true where the qualification leads directly to the award of a 'licence to practice' in a safety critical, financially critical or legally critical situation.

## Conclusion

Professional associations are constantly looking to build their base of members. Reaching out to a wider audience with high quality education and training programmes that lead to valuable qualifications and professional recognition is one of the best ways to achieve this.

There are some hurdles to overcome. Professional associations that have already partnered with universities and colleges may not want to 'compete' by offering their own distance-learning programmes. Universities and colleges may fear that they will undermine their on-campus programmes by offering distance-learning or blended-learning alternatives. Then there is always the issue of up-front investment – the time and money required to develop the programme in the first place.

All of these problems can be solved - as some professional associations such as the Chartered Institute of Bankers (now *ifs School of Finance*) have demonstrated. In all such cases, the provision of suitable distance learning and blended learning programmes has generated major new funding for the association, and the programmes have become not only self-sustaining but profitable in their own right.

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