

BRIEFING PAPER

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Sustainable
Programmes

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Introduction

Over the 20+ years that CAPDM has been involved in the design, development and delivery of large scale on-line, distance and other learning programmes, we have heard many contrasting comments about different approaches to this type of work. Some have been valid and of value. Others have been well wide of the mark - even comical. We, and our educational partners, have listened to them all.

For the record, some of the common comments include:

- “We can do better than anything else available today”. This may (perhaps) be true, but, even if it were, actually doing it counts for rather more than believing you can do it. A bird in the hand ...
- “Our Case Studies are far better than theirs”. Again this may be true, but suppliers often give access to their wide ranging materials and have large numbers of students learning from them, which is very much more effective than keeping tight control over cases that only 20 students get to see with your permission and supervision. The proof of the pudding ...
- “My material is worth a fortune”. This is only ever true if there is a market willing to pay for it, a route to that market, and something to actually take to that market. It is also only true if the materials are offered in a sustainable way and supported in the market. Never count your chickens ...

There are many possible approaches to developing on-line distance programmes and there is no single right way, as our first white paper “*An introduction to distance learning*” outlined. However all successful programmes share some common characteristics:

- they are real (i.e. have been developed -not just an idea in someone’s head);
- they have been launched;
- they are still on the market and financially viable.

Of course, they are all also of a quality that meets the market expectation, and they are pedagogically and educationally sound. That goes without saying.

Launch is
an achievement,
not
success

A key point is that success is not saying you can do it, it is not saying your quality is exceptional, and it is not even building and launching a programme – however good. It is about sustaining that programme into the future in a way that is financially viable, and not crippling with respect to the operations and administration of the programme.

This was hammered home recently when a potential partner, with whom we had done a significant amount of groundwork, preparing the way for the development of a first on-line programme, considered pulling out at the last minute. They were naturally worried about not attracting enough interest (student numbers) to

have the programme pay its way, (though their reputation was always going to ensure that this was not a problem). However they were also worried that they would attract too many students. This would have put too great a strain on their antiquated administrative practices.

They suddenly realised that they had neglected to couple institutional enlightenment to their recently acquired academic enlightenment.

Success is not launch: it is sustainability.

Launching a programme has important implications for sustainability. Firstly, it means that there is a team in place producing the academic content, developing the product, and addressing the student support, sales and marketing. This is probably a set of activities best done in partnership, as most **higher education institutions (HEIs)** are not geared up to do all of these activities.

Reaching launch also implies that the pedagogical designs have been firmed up and the product designs and options put in place. It hopefully also means that the underlying business models, covering the expectations of all stakeholders, are in place. Sustainability relies on a number of factors, one of which is keeping a motivated team in place to re-fresh and evolve the product, to undertake ancillary tasks such as setting and marking assessments, and to research and innovate educationally. This team may have done their work prior to launch, but are they still motivated enough to be doing it five years downstream?

Of course, an HEI may say that “it’s part of their normal duties” to be doing this, but look around at the successful on-line distance programmes and ask how many actually operate this way. These programmes tend to reward stakeholders, through risk sharing - though this is by no means the only model possible. This is, of course, anathema to most HEIs – except it is exactly the model that academics meet when they develop content for a publisher. That is, it is a royalty model. Why should academics not be rewarded similarly for developing content for their own institution?

There are big advantages:

- the institution becomes a publisher (so it has to act like one, including investing in professional production services and managing their content);
- the academics become authors for their own institution (and must assign the intellectual property as appropriate);
- the benefits stay entirely within the institution creating a valuable, long term asset.

There should be a willingness to risk share: if the project fails then no one gains, but if it succeeds then the agreed business model will determine who gets what. Once the financial returns from a successful, and sustainable, programme start being realised they will be an important factor in keeping the team motivated.

Sustain-
ability

Those programmes which have paid their contributors in advance (i.e. before launch) tend to find that the interest of the team of people supporting the programme drops after launch, hence sustainability becomes a problem.

Operations & Adminis- tration

Offering flexible, on-line distance learning programmes represents a departure for many HEIs. In a number of respects this **should be seen as a departure**, otherwise there may be a tendency to simply re-create on-line what is done on-campus. This is a mistake, as it is important to ensure that the characteristics and designs of an on-line programme actually address the needs of a distance and on-line audience.

One of the design features that institutions try to build into these offerings is a degree of personalization of the learning. This may be through offering content in a range of formats, by allowing the student to exploit inherent flexibility – such as timetabling – or by feedback mechanisms. However all of this becomes irrelevant if the operations and administration are still driven in a manner that suits the institution and not adapted to support the needs of the individual.

Part of the sustainability story, therefore, is dependent on the flexibility of the HEI's operational and administrative capability, and dependent on how efficiently and effectively it can scale to handle the routine tasks of distance learning, and the many exceptions to the norm that may arise. Efficient exception handling is critical, as is process ownership.

Many existing student record management systems lack the overall flexibility needed for individual-oriented administration, as they are geared to institutional administration. This is also partly true of some of the commonly used virtual learning environments which may, for example, take a very course oriented view of on-line course development and support. Sustainability relies on flexibility and an ability to move quickly if need be.

Conclusion

Success in on-line distance education is a programme that has been launched, that meets the education needs of a market, and which is generating income streams that make the programme financially viable. This is an indication that the business and pedagogical designs are sound, the product is of good quality and well matched to the target market, and rewarding for both the customer and the institution.

Distance learning developments tend to require an institution to embrace change and to ensure that it has successfully made the transition from operating as independent teams, to operating strategically within the institutional strategic plan. These changes, and the many benefits they bring, are transformational - there is no going back.

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