



CAPDM CASE STUDY

Heriot-Watt University
The World's largest online MBA?

Exec Summary

CAPDM's origins date back to 1991 when a small research group within Heriot-Watt University (HWU) started the development of a distance learning MBA – to be offered globally.

This was a strategic development requiring a formal information strategy to manage the significant amount of content to be developed and cherished. A digital information strategy was devised, based entirely on internationally recognised standards, specifically SGML. Though seen as a strange ploy by many, it proved to be a very wise choice as the principles underpinning this repository are used to this day.

This same information strategy underpins the world Wide Web and its HTML standard format. Therefore, the EBS MBA was in effect web-ready from day one, though it was some time before the online MBA had a market. However, the online version is the dominant version produced through custom publishing systems developed to support multi-channel delivery.

About

CAPDM was set up in the 1990s to service the development of the holistic, online distance education business at HWU.

As a business, required four core 'models' to be implemented:

1. Business Model, including all key decisions on issues such as tutor support and reward sharing
2. Pedagogic Model, which CAPDM specified to effect the move to online delivery
3. Production Model, where our digital awareness and strategy was crucial in the early days
4. Operational and Administration Model, which CAPDMers designed and built as a holistic university-wide system to handle all distance learning.

Details of all of these are written up as a generic '[business strategy](#)' White Paper for universities looking to develop a business in online learning. The management and delivery of the significant volume of high-value, long-lifetime learning materials provided a necessary infrastructure for all subsequent developments, particularly the online delivery.



Challenges

With almost all academic staff predicting disaster, a small group at HWU embarked on the development of its distance MBA in 1990. The challenges were many. For example: getting academic approval and finding willing contributors; developing the product; and marketing a small university to a global audience.

A small, but expert, team was put together to develop the information strategy, the related knowledge structures, and the systems required to provide scalable and repeatable production work-flows to develop the actual product. This team became CAPDM in 1996. The strategy was centred around SGML, but required a complete publishing suite to be developed to handle the core content and to produce the required outputs.

The wisdom of this strategy was highlighted when the WWW emerged as a potential delivery platform. This choice meant that HWU was ready from day one to be able to deliver online, though it would take a few years before a market could be identified. Now the online option completely dominates.



Help

CAPDM information strategy that laid the foundations for the EBS MBA has been pursued to the present day with all clients. Many universities and professional associations now have a formal digital strategy for online and distance delivery - based on the success and foundations laid down at HWU.

These early designs and information structures were semantically rich, with courses developed around key Learning Objectives. These provide the hooks for student progress profiling and the personalisation of feedback and delivery.

CAPDM's work also involved guiding and supporting the many academics in the development of support materials that completed the set of learning materials for MBA. This guidance was a particular strength and requirement when we later proposed and co-developed the HWU undergraduate distance Management Programme (MP). CAPDM's experience was vital in motivating and organising the 60+ academics who produced the required content. The MP and the MBA both produce significant, sustained income, and are flagship developments in the global ambitions at HWU.

Results

HWU is now a truly global university, with students and graduates in 160+ countries. The success of the MBA and MP have been critical to the university's global ambitions, but they were, in a sense, not strategic developments within the wider university. Institutions can present many barriers and reasons to shun online distance learning, and these developments succeeded despite the many challenges they faced.

Early success soon changed attitudes however and HWU has since built a very ambitious and successful global strategy on the back of these developments.

CAPDM's involvement, which spanned nearly 20 years, is now historic so it will quickly be forgotten in an environment that generally lacks any corporate memory. However, without significant input from CAPDM, the MBA would have been very different to that seen today, the HWU administration systems would probably have held back early success, and the MP would never have happened. We remember the importance and long term impact of the contribution we made.



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