

Transitioning to online education in the Caribbean: The Open Campus, University of the West Indies

Formal Education: Technologies for Scaling up ODL programmes

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Introduction

There is an increasing demand for tertiary education in several regions of the world (Kanwar & Daniel 2008), despite the often limited economic resources in developing countries. One method of meeting the demand is through distance education, specifically online education. For the purposes of this paper, the term online education will be defined as a means of instruction where contact between students, the instructor and the course material is mediated by the computer through the internet (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Courses can be blended (both online and face-to-face) or completely online.

Online courses are particularly important for educational provision in small states and regional universities who cater to a diverse student body in many different locations (Ezenne & Cook, 2002; Marshall, 2005). In the Caribbean, online education can provide education that is scalable, responsive to Caribbean needs, designed in collaboration with others and economical (Marshall, 2005).

The University of the West Indies (UWI) serves 16 developing countries in the Anglophone Caribbean and has been providing distance education since 1978 (Marrett & Harvey, 2001). The newest campus of UWI, the Open Campus was created to provide the non campus countries with increased access to education (Thurab-Nkosi & Marshall, 2006) by leveraging the opportunities offered by the Internet.

Transitioning to online delivery necessitates considerable changes in organizational structure, and technology use, but more importantly, it requires significant changes in teaching, in learning and in organizational culture. Several factors that have been identified as being important in educational change include a focus on teaching and learning (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993), leadership (Anderson, 2006, Campbell & Fullan, 2006; Vogel & Muirhead, 2007) and organizational culture (Stoll, 2003). In addition, preparing a strategic plan for technology integration is essential for success (Vogel & Muirhead, 2007; Sife, Lwoga & Sanga, 2007). Levy (2003) and others (Bates, 2007; Haughey, 2007; Kuboni & Martin, 2004; Thurab-Nkosi & Marshall, 2006;) suggest that vision, curriculum, staff and student training and support, and copyright are all issues that must be addressed in successful transitions to online modes of delivery.

Stakeholder attitudes towards teaching and learning online can also severely impact the success of the transition (Kosak et al., 2000; Haughey, 2007; Hope, 2006). Davis (1989) measured attitudes based on the hypothesis that people will use technologies if they believe that it will help them to perform a task more effectively (perceived usefulness) or if they believe that the technology will be easy to use (perceived ease of use). Research on student attitudes generally shows that a more positive attitude towards online education results in an increased use of online education (Drennan, Kennedy & Pisarski, 2005; Liaw, Huang & Chen 2007; Panda & Mishra, 2007; Yuen, Allan & Ma, 2008).

Online education has the potential to increase access to tertiary education in developing countries, although the shift will require significant changes in organizational culture and methods of teaching and learning. This study examines how the Open Campus, University of the West Indies is coping with the some of the issues involved with transitioning from traditional means of distance education to the use of online courses.

Statement of the Research Problem

How is the transition to online distance education taking place at the UWI Open Campus?

Research sub questions

- How do internal stakeholders describe the role of leadership in the transition?
- How well does the vision of the stakeholders align with the official vision of the Open Campus?
- What challenges have been encountered in the transition and how have they been addressed?
- What attitudes do students exhibit towards online learning?

Research Methodology and Data Collection

This paper reports on some of the data collected from an exploratory case study using a single case design (Yin, 1994). The study collected data from interviews, document analysis and online surveys to describe the shift to online education at the Open Campus, UWI.

Purposive sampling was used to select twenty-three staff members for semi-structured interviews, based on their roles in the organization (administrative or instructional). Individuals were asked about their understanding of the vision of the Open Campus (OC), the role of leadership, the challenges experienced in the transition.

Student views on online learning were solicited using an online survey that was made available to all students taking courses online. The survey included questions relating to the ease of use and effectiveness constructs as described by Davis (1989) as well as open ended and several demographic questions. Most survey questions were five point Likert scale items.

RESULTS

Leadership

This study sought to elicit the understanding of participants on the role of leadership in the transition. All of the interview subjects were in leadership positions at various levels within the organization. Participants believe that "... leadership is very integral to the formulation of it [the vision], to the implementation of it and to the actual delivery of it. It is one of the most important aspects of pushing online education" (Interview data). Although participants were generally supportive of those in leadership positions, they were critical of the manner in which some aspects of the transition were handled and emphasized that effective leadership should display the following characteristics:

1. Leaders need to be participatory and firm in decision making.

"And that person has to be... participative yes but also the decision-making has to be firm and it has to be clear" (Interview data).

2. Leadership must listen to and communicate with staff and stakeholders.

"We need strong leadership - a leadership that says this is where we are going but at the same time a leadership that listens to what people's concerns are and what they think of where we need to be going" (Interview data).

3. Successful leaders obtain buy-in for their vision and carry their organizations with them.

"So you have to get people to believe in it [the vision]. You know that it will benefit them, and therefore those who are implementing it or those who have the responsibility for supporting such a system you have to get buy-in from them first and then those for whom you are putting the system in place and expecting them to use it..." (Interview data).

4. Leaders must set clear directions for change.

"But when you are changing something there has to be a core understanding of where we are going at all times" (Interview data).

Vision

When asked about their understanding of the vision for the Open Campus, interview participants reported that the vision was to increase access to tertiary education in the Caribbean region. This view was consistently held across all participant groups and stated in almost the same words by all staff. One individual summed it up in this way "you see you have to think of access- what it is the OC is trying to achieve? To increase access to quality tertiary education in the region" (Interview data).

The vision described by participants aligns very well with the official version of the vision of the Open Campus as it is summarized in their guiding principles: "The Open Campus of the University of the West Indies is based on the idea that the high-quality university education, research and services available at our institution should be open and available to all people who wish to reach their full potential inside and outside of the Caribbean region." (UWIOC 2010)

This vision hinges on two important concepts, access and openness. Access was repeatedly referred to by participants but the concept of openness was mentioned less frequently. Openness seemed to be understood much more clearly at the highest level of administration than in lower levels. Participants had differing views on the meaning of openness, some of which overlapped with their understanding of access. Participants understood openness to mean:

- The ability of students to access course materials from anywhere, at any time via the internet
- The removal of obstacles to access to courses through the use of Prior Learning Assessment programmes or other means

In contrast, documents published on the OC website explained openness as:

- A commitment to the ideals of open and flexible learning
- Making official documentation freely available to stakeholders via the internet
- A commitment to using Open Source software and Open Educational Resources.

Staff Challenges

The interviewees were asked to identify the challenges that the OC faced in the transition. The challenges most often mentioned by the staff were:

- Communication
- Finances
- Human resource issues
- Changing organizational culture

Communication

Participants identified communication as "the biggest and most critical part of the process" (Interview data). The OC has staff and students geographically distributed over 42 sites in 16 countries, which can make face to face (F2F) communication difficult. Several interviewees thought that changes were "not communicated timely enough to the support staff...from the implementers or the policy makers" (Interview data). In addition, staff felt that their views were not being solicited before the changes were implemented. In their opinion, this lack of timely communication caused frustration and limited their ability to provide correct information and sell the vision to the students.

This challenge is being addressed through the use of the website as a communication tool, the use of online newsletters, regular meetings with various levels of staff both online and F2F as well as a general administrative open door policy for upper administration.

Finances

Much of the funding for the UWI comes from the governments of the countries which are serviced by UWI. However, these governments are “always in arrears- we’re dreadfully in arrears- I mean I think the figure we mentioned the other day was 9 million dollars for this year” (Interview data). This makes it difficult for budgeted projects to be executed as planned. The Open Campus was no exception, especially as it was launched at a time when the world financial markets had just plunged into a recession. Many of the small island states of the Caribbean were severely affected because their economies are heavily dependent on tourism. It is the view of those interviewed that the lack of finance has affected the OC in a number of ways, specifically by reducing the number of programmes that they can offer and by limiting the ability of the organization to acquire the human resources required to design, deliver and support those programmes.

While the OC cannot force the governments to pay the monies owed, it has sought to deal with the shortfall by not filling all of the positions created on the organizational chart.

Human Resource Issues

The OC was formed through the merger of three previously existing entities (the School of Continuing Studies, the UWI Distance Education Centre and the Tertiary Learning Institutions Unit). These units were distinct in function and organizational culture, although in some areas they shared the same physical location. Simultaneously, a new organizational structure was implemented in order to provide for service centralization in terms of programme delivery. These changes resulted in much distress among staff members, who were uncertain that their positions were secure in the new structure and who also felt that previous human resource issues had not been addressed in the new organization. Previously distinct groups were now being asked to work together as a single entity. In addition, in some cases they also were being asked to do more, as a result of insufficient funds available to create some of the proposed positions. These issues were compounded by the fact that each country has different labour regulations and unions.

These challenges are currently being addressed by an increase in communication from those in leadership positions in order to allay staff fears and the hiring of a human resource manager to oversee this area.

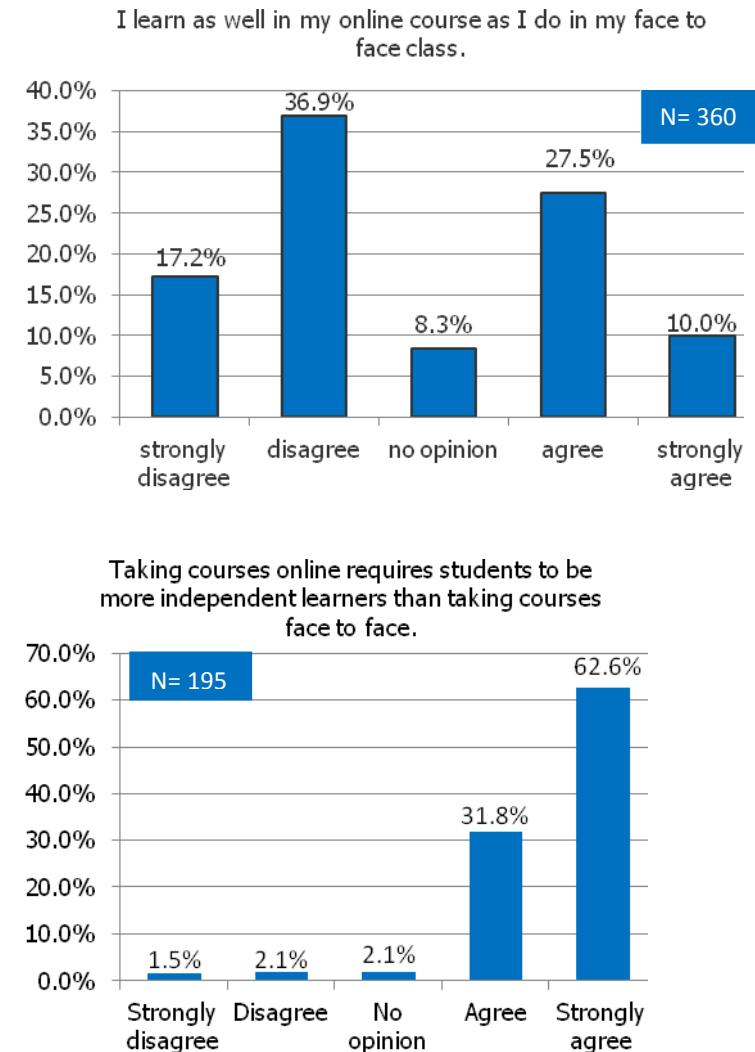
Cultural Shifts

In addition to the aforementioned changes, the Open Campus is also attempting to instil a new organizational culture; i.e. a business culture that views the student as the client and makes their needs paramount. Some of those interviewed believed that OC (as a subset of the wider UWI community) was generally non responsive to students needs. Several interviewees emphasised that this was by far the most difficult aspect of the transition. The greatest “challenge has been to try and shift from a traditional concept to a business and commercially-oriented enterprise that will be efficient, that will be service oriented, that will give students the quick and immediate responses that they need...” (Interview data). This shift is deemed necessary because “unlike the other campuses, the Open Campus aimed to be largely self-financing” (Interview data) and will therefore need to adopt a service model to successfully compete in the education marketplace.

Student Challenges

The primary issue for the students was the change in the instructional methodology and the corresponding requirement for a change in their learning strategies. Students found this difficult and did not believe that they learnt as well online as they would in a F2F class (Figure 1).

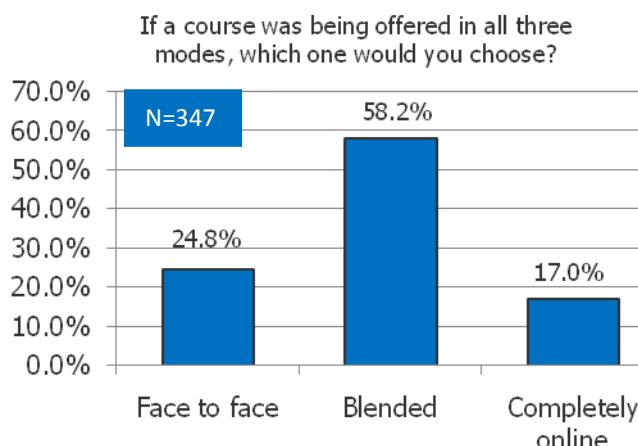
Figure 1: Student Beliefs about Online Learning



Students believe that online courses require more independent learning. One student commented that F2F students "... get better opportunities to learn with an actual teacher standing in front them and teaching. Online students have to do all the work on their own..." (Interview data). There is a disconnect between student desires for learning and the intentions of the administration, in that the administration would like to "... wean them off the idea of being dependant learners to becoming truly independent" (Interview data).

Although the majority of the students indicated that they appreciated the flexibility of the online course there was a strong preference for blended courses among the students. In the open-ended comment question many of the students requested that more classes to be taught in blended mode. The primary reason given for this choice was that they could benefit from the flexibility of online classes while still having the advantage of a F2F discussion with an instructor.

Figure 2: Student Choices of Course Delivery Mode



One method of dealing with this challenge has been to provide student support through the use of e-tutors who are mandated to respond to students within 48 hours, course coordinators and an online helpdesk facility.

Discussion

This paper sought to examine vision, leadership, student attitudes and the challenges encountered in the transition to online learning. At the heart of this shift is a change in culture – the culture of teaching and learning and the organizational culture which supports online education. In order to successfully complete this transition individuals will need to become skilled at leading, teaching, learning and communicating in new ways.

Leaders provide direction, exercise influence and can significantly impact student learning (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood & Anderson, 2010). Staff agreed that leadership was the driver for this change (Phillips, 2005) and that leaders must communicate the vision clearly to the stakeholders to enable effective change to take place (Beaudoin, 2002; Browne, 2005). The interview subjects' description of the OC's vision aligned well with the official vision statement for increasing access, which implies that the leadership was successful in communicating the vision and gaining buy in. However, there is less clarity on the concept of openness, which implies a lower level of buy-in from staff. This concept of openness will need clarification and buy-in at all levels of the OC as well as the wider UWI community, because of the significant pedagogical and philosophical change required. A commitment to using and producing open source software and open educational resources requires a shift away from the traditional concept

of copyright which is currently the norm in UWI to the use of the creative commons copyright, which allows others to share, remix and reuse material legally.

The need to adequately fund online education is self-evident. Funding impacts all other areas of the transition including human resource procurement and communications management. Although communication is often overlooked, effective communication can increase buy-in and reduce human resource issues (Stoltenkamp & Kasuto, 2009), which are often significant obstacles (Haughey, 2007; Hope, 2006). The oral tradition in the region may also be negatively impacting interviewees' view of communication, since for the majority communicating virtually rather than F2F or by phone was relatively new and not necessarily within their comfort zone. This unfamiliarity may also be affecting their ability to effectively sell the vision to the students.

Leadership has been able to obtain buy-in from the staff interviewed, but while students agree with the vision for access, many are not convinced that they learn as well in online courses. Students are resistant to increasing their academic independence (Phillips, 2005) and demonstrate a marked preference for blended classes. This preference may prove problematic for the administration since their intent appears to be to increase the percentage of fully online courses. Further research needs to explore which aspects of blended courses are desirable to students and how those could be replicated in online classes. In addition, research could explore how leadership can influence student attitudes towards online education.

Conclusion

Developing countries often struggle to provide adequate tertiary level education for their citizens and must devise solutions which can be accomplished within their economic limitations. This study outlines critical areas in the transition to online learning as exemplified by the Open Campus, UWI. This research suggests that having a clear vision, participatory leadership, implementing a communications plan, ensuring adequate finances and understanding student attitudes towards online education can help alleviate challenges that will be experienced as institutions seek to increase provision of tertiary education to the peoples of the Caribbean region and beyond.

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