MANAGING DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION BY LEARNING NEEDS

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Abstract. While institutional endeavour to the development of higher education is highly demanding in face-to-face environments, it is even more challenging in distance education (DE) settings, which are based on contemporary information and communication technologies. This paper examines some DE challenges encountered and the solutions developed to address them over a recent year period at Mykolas Romeris University. Firstly, it reflects over the management strategies of educational market research employed for conducting needs assessment of academics and their potential students. Secondly, it analyses some results of survey research, which suggest using such technologies that are in accordance with students' preferences for continuing distance education. Finally, the paper concludes with some insights on learning needs for continuing distance education that might be useful to those academics that are responsible for DE management in conventional universities and colleges.

Keywords: distance continuing education, entrepreneurship, learning needs, market research, information technology.

1. Indroduction

The continual advances in science and knowledge motivate professionals to be engaged in the permanent process of lifelong learning. Since distance education (DE) creates possibilities of learning in "anytime and anyplace" regime, more practitioners find this mode of educational provision of being attractive in particular. However, possibilities of practitioners' engagement in distance learning programs and courses depend totally on educational offers provided by institutions of higher education.

In practice, those offers have been developed relying mainly on two extreme traditions: teacher-laid or student-cantered [3]. If the first approach dominates in the university, students are offered to study such programs or courses and in such ways as academics find to be worth of delivering. This type of offers, however, undermines dignity of the adult learner and prevents academics from treating the student as an equal partner. This in turn, further supports the continuing prevalent circulation of hierarchies in our minds, behaviour and institutional structures. In order to avoid these pitfalls, more institutions tend to apply the second approach. Its essence refers to the educational needs perceived not so much by academics as by students themselves.

As a rule, universities, which adhere to the student-cantered approach, rely on educational market research, which helps identifying perceived learning needs. It is understandable that the challenge for successful educational market research falls upon managers who are responsible for the development of institutional DE offers. However, because the academic debate on educational market research ranges from modern objective to post-modern intersubjective research strategies suggested as being trust worthy [2, 8, 9, 12], in practice it becomes confusing to organize reliable market research.

This paper attempts to tell a story on how the challenge of educational market research has been met at Mykolas Romeris University (MRU), which is one of the youngest higher education institutions among the other 21 universities in Lithuania. The university delivers programs associated mainly with the studies in law, public administration and social work. The purpose of telling our story is three folded:

1. To share local experience, which may be meaningful elsewhere.

2. Since entrepreneurship (well described by, e.g., B. Clark [1], S. Slaughter and L.L. Leslie [11]) is a quite new phenomenon in Lithuanian higher education, the story is meant to illustrate how the idea of 'Service University' has been applied in DE practice while integrating modern and post-modern academic values of educational market research.

3. The story is used as a means of revealing a few survey research-based insights on learning needs for continuing distance education that meanwhile run in contradiction to the growing "internetization" of distance education.

Firstly, the story reflects over the management strategies of educational market research employed by Distance Education Center at the university. Secondly, it presents comparative analysis of survey research results. Finally, the paper concludes with some insights on learning needs for continuing distance education that might be useful to those academics that are responsible for DE management in conventional universities and colleges.

2. Reflecting over Educational Market Research

J. McKillip [4] defines market research as an approach to needs assessment, which is usually applied for selecting a target population, evaluating a competitive position and developing a right marketing mix of educational products and services that meet the needs of target populations. As our experience suggests, the term "educational market research" may also be used in its broader sense as a type of either fundamental or applied research, which includes a systematic collection, analysis, assessment and reporting of data and insights that are focused around the concept of educational needs. Based on this assumption educational market research may be subdivided at least into three types: exploratory, pilot-type and diagnostic.

Exploratory research is aimed at finding a balance between the overall demand and supply of DE courses and programs delivered to particular student cohorts in a particular region. Pilot research is aimed at evaluating how a package of instructional materials corresponds to student needs and whether it enables students to learn those things that are promised. Diagnostic research is carried out during student admission procedures and is aimed at defining students' needs pertinent to their expectations, learning styles, demands for adequate type of course materials (e.g., digital, print, audio, video), communication technologies and institutional services.

While all types of educational market research can be useful for developing and implementing institutional distance education policies adequate to learning needs, nevertheless, applied exploratory research serves this purpose directly. It can give reliable information for strategic planning and choosing which new courses and programs need to be developed. It also can provide information on potential students' profiles and demands associated with their preferences for adequate institutional support including teaching and technical assistance. In the following sections we will reflect briefly how this strategy of educational-exploratory market research has been applied at Mykolas Romeris University.

3. Reflecting over Educational-exploratory Market Research

Educational market research is a continuous process and may be targeted at different groups of potential learners. Since the idea of lifelong learning encourages noticing the professionals as a separate group of potential learners that have been underserved by universities, the challenge for developing a system of continuing distance education has been taken upon seriously: a three-year project titled "Exploring needs for continuing distance education: 2004-2007" (Encde-7) has been developed at Mykolas Romeris University. The project consists of introduction and three parts that highlight conceptual, methodological and procedural strategies of the exploratory educational market research. The first two parts are based on studies of academic literature and reveals theoretical foundations of the long-range research, while the last part follows some considerations of institutional resource restrictions and reveals planned research stages and procedures. What is it all about?

The project is meant to assure rational steps aimed at revealing learning needs for institutional continuing distance education. The essence of the conceptual section that highlights conceptual foundations of the planned research can be briefly summarised as follows: "learning needs for institutional distance education" can be defined to constitute the facts of individual state of mind that signals not only about a) the requirements for specific knowledge, skills or competences, which are perceived to be of vital importance for the individual but also about b) the demands for specific distance learning and teaching strategies and technologies as well as self-study materials that facilitate cognitive and behavioural changes of the individual.

As review of academic literature suggests, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are appropriate for finding out learning experiences, barriers, interests, expectations and preferences that are perceived by potential learners [5: 153–170; 9; 10: 72]. Quantitative methodology is useful if a research deals with large populations and is aimed at uncovering reliable typologies of learning contingent, including a characteristic of a typical learner as a representative of a specific social group. Qualitative methodology is more appropriate while dealing with a small group of respondents or focusing on individual learning needs.

Therefore we have planned to employ a strategy of various triangulations for combining both methodologies and multiple research methods that allow getting true pictures from many sources and viewpoints. We have chosen to apply document reviews, surveys, focus groups and interviews as the main data collection methods, because they are quite inexpensive and easy to be administrated. The long-range research has been planned to follow three yearlong stages, which in turn have been split into separate cycles based on the differentiation among separate target groups.

The first year stage of the empirical study is supposed to be closed with the results on perceived learning needs for continuing distance education as regards potential student cohorts from the legal and public administration systems of Lithuania, including judicial institutions, the police, municipalities, the parliamentary and governmental establishments, to name but a few. The same stage also includes the study of faculty learning needs at Mykolas Romeris University. The second stage has been planned to deal with the sector of public social service, while the last stage of the project will be targeted at those populations (including students with special needs) whose educational needs have been missed by the first two stages.

Since the first academic year of the project will expire after a few months, it is possible to report on its preliminary results. Having in mind space restrictions of the paper, further, only a small piece of the research will be reflected over.

4. Reflecting over the Survey of the Judiciary Educational Needs

The judicial system of the Republic of Lithuania joins 1) autonomy establishments of courts, 2) courts of general jurisdiction and 3) special-administrative courts [6]. There are 54 district courts belonging to the courts of general jurisdiction that have been chosen for conducting expert interviews and survey studies while only expert interviews have been carried out in the other categories of judicial establishments, which embrace quite small numbers of professional judges.

In the district courts, the interviews and survey research have been conducted in two phases: phase one involves the study conducted in Vilnius, which is the capital of Lithuania; phase two is focused on the other regions of Lithuania. That was done because of hypothesising in advance that regional differences based on the category of "capital-regions" would be meaningful not only qualitatively but also statistically.

There are 85 judges working in 4 district courts in Vilnius [7]. 64 (75,2%) judges from the total number participated in the survey study. This number of the received responses corresponds to 95% reliability of the sample with maximal dispersion and probability of ±6% deviation. Although the sample belongs to the category of purposeful sampling, it also satisfies the principles of randomization and representativeness because every member from the whole sampling frame referred to the judiciary of Lithuania's district courts in Vilnius had an equal chance to participate in the survey study.

The other Lithuania's regions include 50 district courts where 348 judges work (NTA, 2005). 8 district courts from 8 regions of Lithuania refused to participate in the research. 97 (49,7%) judges from the rest district courts with the total number of 195 professionals participated in the survey study. This number of the received responses also corresponds to

95% reliability of the sample with maximal dispersion and probability of 8,46% deviation. In this case, however, we can only assume that the sample satisfies the principles of randomization and representativeness because of restricted access to the respondents from the regional courts of Lithuania.

A survey questionnaire was originally designed as a result of the review of academic literature and modified with the aid of expert interviews and pilot testing strategy. The questionnaire includes 27 structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions, which are focused on 1) distance learning experience; 2) motivational factors related to learning aims and subjects; 3) learning conditions associated with technology access and usage; 4) expectations for teaching styles, speed and tempo; 5) preferences for media and faculty support; 6) financial potentials; and 7) demographic information.

After permission for the research had been received by telephone, site visits followed and the invitation letter with the questionnaires was handed or e-mailed to all district courts. The response time was not limited. Therefore the responses from regional district courts have still been coming. The responses received have been aggregated using the SPSS data analysis software package. Descriptive statistics and percentage charts by total have been computed for all of the response items. Due to space limitations, comparative analysis and interpretation of preliminary data pertinent to the area of technology usage is explicated here.

Since it has been planned to increase online learning opportunities, it was important to identify whether the judiciary had experience of using computers and the Internet and whether they had access to computers. Other questions related to learning technology that the survey was expected to answer were what type of instructional materials and communicational strategies would satisfy educational needs associated with perceptions of Vilnius and regional judiciary. Further, we review briefly the responses received and their implications for institutional policies and management strategies pertinent to DE development at Mykolas Romeris University.

5. Reflecting over the Survey Results of the Judiciary Educational Needs

Figure 1 illustrates comparative findings on the experience of computer usage as perceived by Vilnius and regional judiciary. As Vilnius study reveals the majority of the judiciary (62,5 %) stated having little experience of using computers; 25% of respondents indicated having average experience; and 12,5 % of the judiciary perceived as having no experience of computer usage.

According to the responses of the regional judiciary the vast majority (73,7%) of them indicated having average experience of computer usage; 15,8% found

having little experience; and only 10,5% of the regional judiciary stated having extensive experience.
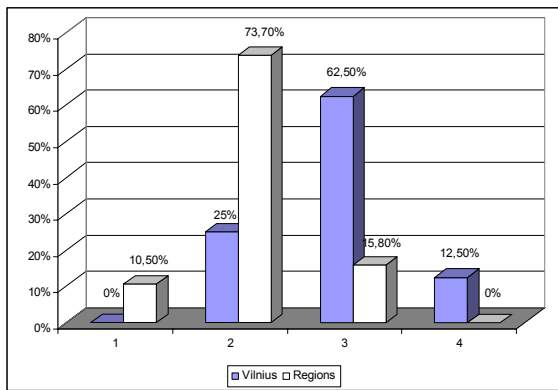

Figure 1. The judiciary experience of using computers:
1 – extensive; 2 – average; 3 – little; 4 – non-existence

Figure 2 illustrates comparative findings on the Internet literacy as perceived by Vilnius and regional judiciary. As Vilnius study reveals, a half of the judiciary (50%) assessed their skills associated with the Internet usage as being of low level; 25% of the judiciary informed having high level skills; and 25% of the respondents stated having average level of skills.
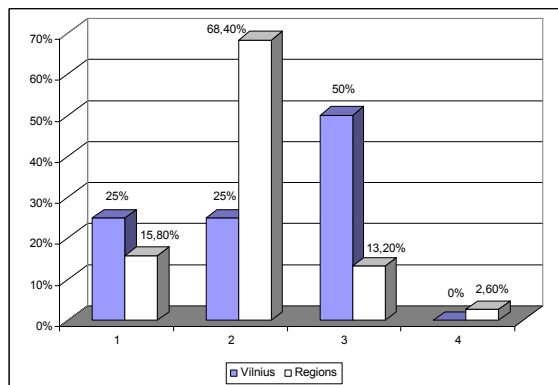

Figure 2. The judiciary internet literacy: 1 – high; 2 – average; 3 – low; 4 – no skills

According to the responses of the regional judiciary, greater than a half (68,4%) of the judiciary assessed their Internet literacy as being of average level; 15,8% found having high level skills; 13,2% indicated low level skills; and 2,6% of the regional judiciary stated having no Internet literacy skills.

Figure 3 illustrates comparative findings on preferences for the packages of instructional materials and its accessibility as perceived by Vilnius and regional judiciary. As Vilnius study reveals, all respondents (100%) chose print as the most attractive type of instructional materials; 50% of the judiciary acknowledged that a digital package of learning materials would satisfy their needs if it were accessible via the Internet or sent by e-mail; and 37,5% of the respondents informed that they also would like to learn from audio cassettes or CD-ROMs.
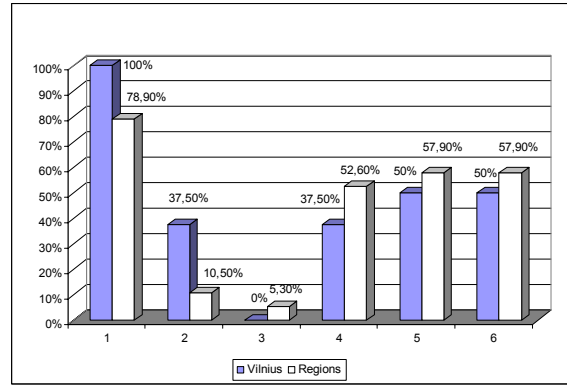

Figure 3. The judiciary preferences for instructional materials: 1 – print; 2 – audio cassettes; 3 – video cassettes; 4 – CD-ROM; 5 – digital data sent by e-mail; 6 – digital data accessible via the Internet

According to the responses of the regional judiciary, the majority of the respondents (78,9%) also preferred print to the other types of instructional materials; over a half (52,6%) required to include CD-ROMs; 57,9% appreciated a digital package of learning materials available via the Internet or sent by e-mail; 10,5% and 5,3% of the regional judiciary would not mind learning from audio cassettes and video cassettes respectively.

Figure 4 illustrates comparative findings on preferences for the means of instructional communication as perceived by Vilnius and regional judiciary. As Vilnius study reveals, all respondents stated that on-campus face-to-face communication were their highest priority; 50% of the judiciary also would like that some portion of instructional communication occurred at their working place by face-to-face meetings or by telephone; 25% of the judiciary expressed willingness to participate in video conferences or to correspond by traditional mail; and 12.5% of Vilnius judiciary wished that instructional communication would be enriched by e-mail correspondence.
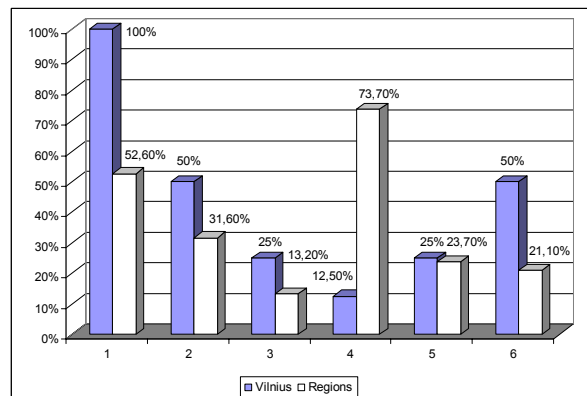

Figure 4. The judiciary preferences for the means of communication: 1 – campus-place meetings;
2 – working-place meetings; 3 – video-conferencing;
4 – correspondence by e-mail; 5 - correspondence by traditional mail; 6 – communication by phone

According to responses of the regional judiciary, the majority of the respondents (73,7%) preferred e-mail communication; however over a half of the regional judiciary (52,6%) also requested on-campus face-to-face communication, while 31,6% found working-place meetings to be important as well; some regional judiciary also required correspondence by traditional mail (23,7%) and consultancy by telephone (21,1%); just very small proportion of the regional respondents (13,2%) stated that they would not mind participating in video conferences.

6. Conclusion

The significance of these findings may be articulated in both scientific and practical senses that stem from the following generalizations and interpretations:

1. On the ground of computer usage experience, there is statistically significant difference between Vilnius and regional judiciary cohorts: $\chi^2 = 7,54$ (p< 0.05);

2. Although according to the other researched properties no statistically significant differences have been traced, the survey evidence points to the qualitative multiplicity of learning needs;

These as well as other findings obtained by the educational-exploratory market research call attention to develop such distance continuing education that the qualitative multiplicity of learning needs would be met by diversified institutional offers. Institutional diagnostic research applied during student admission procedures is necessary for identifying particular learning needs, while institutional management strategies based on blended learning approach are necessary to accommodate those needs with specific educational provisions.

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