Chapter 1

Diversity and Design:
An Emergent Model of Matching Curricula Design to Student Need

Debbie Holley
London Metropolitan Business School, UK

Martin Oliver
London Knowledge Lab, UK

ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions have worked to make equality of access to electronic curriculum resources the ‘status quo’. However, there is evidence that simply providing e-learning – no matter how well intentioned – is insufficient to address the problems that students are experiencing. A three stage model has been developed through analysis of students’ learning experiences at an inner-city, post-1992 University to illustrate how students have to negotiate their engagement with Higher Education. The model provides a way of mapping aspects of course design to different portraits of students, enabling students to be considered as high, medium and low risk in terms of retention. The value of this model for design and analysis of courses is located within the debate of how inclusive business schools curricula are for a diverse student body.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter contributes to current debates about curriculum offerings by Business Schools in the UK. This represents a significant and growing area within UK Higher Education. From the latest data available, in the academic year 2007/08, almost 1 in 7 of all students were studying business and management; a significant proportion of which studied at undergraduate level. During the past thirteen years undergraduate study of this subject has risen by 66 percent (Association of Business Schools 2008:19). In the light of this growth, the Governmental view of higher education as primarily about feeding the needs of industry can be seen as highly contentious. In particular, there can be tensions between this economic imperative and
social agendas such as widening participation. It is this tension that sets the context for the chapter.

Higher Education Institutions have made it a matter of principle that all students should have equality of access to e-learning. However, there is evidence that simply providing e-learning – no matter how well intentioned – is insufficient to address the problems that students are experiencing. Indeed, it has been suggested that blanket provision may cause as many problems as it solves. Daniel (1996) in his book ‘Knowledge, Media and Mega-Universities’ calls for a dialogue about the use of the new technologies with the aims of high volume, low cost, and high quality. The industrialisation of technology for learning follows many principles of technological implementation for business in that it focuses on economies of scale, best suited to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ operation. For example, post the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) and its recommendations for resource based learning, universities in the UK and elsewhere have invested heavily and systematically in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). A VLE can be defined as, “a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources” (Jisc Infonet). Thus this tool matches a managerial agenda with the needs of providing a robust system for content delivery to students.

A three stage model has been developed (Holley & Oliver 2009) through cross case analysis of students’ learning experiences in a Business School to explain some of the tensions between the delivery of a standardised blended learning offering, for example via a VLE, and the frustrations and difficulties some students experience in their efforts to participate fully in the blended curriculum. This model illustrates how, even when issues of access are ‘solved’, students have to create new and innovative ways to negotiate their engagement with Higher Education. This negotiation involves their individual expectations of:

- Their ability to control technology
- Their forthcoming educational experience
- Managing their ‘learning space’, including the times and settings when they study

This allows aspects of course design to be mapped against different portraits of students, resulting in an assessment of risks in terms of retention. The value of using this model when designing and analysing courses will be argued.

**CONTEXT**

The UK’s attempts to develop alternatives to traditional classroom teaching can best be understood within wider international concerns about meeting the needs of a “knowledge economy” (Hodge, 2002).

“Education and skills are the key to a competitive and efficient workforce. Top quality management and strong leadership is a crucial factor in this. Business and Management continues to be one of the most popular University subjects at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.” Rammell (2009)

Within this context, political intervention in higher education is, from governmental perspectives, justified in terms of enabling the UK to compete within the international trading environment. For example, White & Davis (2002) portray technology as breaking down international barriers to education. Computer-mediated learning environments are argued to make possible whole new ways of learning. They create global learning communities that can bring together academics and professional practitioners. Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read (2002:18) foresee a future where the distinctions between classroom based and internet based education is completely eroded, and teaching methods become tailored to the needs of the subject and students. However,