Chapter 21

Building an Online Undergraduate Module from a Graduate Module: A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online teaching has not, as yet, penetrated too deeply into the undergraduate culture, and most successful programs are targeted towards vocational learning or postgraduate courses. This chapter details the experiences of translating a successful online teaching paradigm used in a fully online postgraduate degree to an undergraduate degree program. The online teaching model is based on a semi-Socratic paradigm, and is largely constructivist in nature. This model is successfully used in the largest international fully online MSc course, and targets working professionals too busy to attend the traditional classroom environment. This case study examines the applicability of the postgraduate model to an existing core subject within the School of Information Systems in the Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University.

A pilot program conducted under an internal University grant to apply the postgraduate model to the undergraduate core subject was run for two semesters in 2004. The experiences of teaching within the pilot and the experiences of the students
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are examined, along with the success or otherwise of the pilot program. The main objective of this case study is to determine the appropriateness of using the postgraduate model at undergraduate level by examining the performance of three separate undergraduate groups studying the redesigned online undergraduate subject. As the graduate model is based on a semi-Socratic paradigm of initial discussion questions and follow-on weekly discussions, it was not at all clear that such a paradigm would be applicable at the undergraduate level. Given the limited working experience of undergraduates (of which the chosen paradigm relies heavily), a translation of the paradigm could lose its effectuality on the intended student population. Yet the changing demographics of students suggests an online subject based on this paradigm may be successful.

The challenge for the School of Information Systems is to develop successful alternate programs of study for the growing minority of students who require the flexibility that these programs can offer.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Victoria University is a relatively new university, being formed as recently as 1992 from the merger of two former Institutes of Technology. The recent addition of the Western Melbourne Institute of Technical and Further Education, which was previously involved primarily with industrial training, has made Victoria University into one of Australia’s largest universities. It is one of only five dual-sector universities catering to a wide range of tertiary students from the central and western suburbs of Melbourne. Victoria University has over 50,000 students and over 3,000 staff, along with more than 2,300 international students studying both offshore and onshore.

The School of Information Systems conducts undergraduate and graduate courses in a diverse range, including the core Bachelor of Business (Information Systems), Electronic Commerce, and specialist joint degrees in Arts Multimedia, Music Industry and Electronic Commerce, Marketing/ Electronic Commerce, and Law/Electronic Commerce. Graduate degrees include the Master degrees in Information Systems and Enterprise Resource Planning. Within these degrees, the school offers a very diverse range of subjects. Some are quite technical in nature while others are much more generally business-related. On average, students tend to mix electives across both ends of this spectrum. The latest technology is used in all information systems degrees and joint degrees.

As a new and rapidly changing technological institution, Victoria University has been very conscious of the need to continually reevaluate its curriculum, and to look for new ways of best providing for the needs of its students and the business
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