Chapter 17
Societal Issues, Legal Standards, & International Realities Universities Face in the Distance-Learning Market

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ABSTRACT

In today’s global economy, both students and workers need to be lifelong learners. While some universities have been slow to recognize these changing needs, others have quickly moved to serve this new academic market. The eLearning revolution empowers individuals to take courses and to earn degrees from local or foreign universities. In developing nations, a foreign degree may, in fact, be more attractive than a local degree if the student plans to migrate (Herbst, 2008). This chapter discusses societal, international, cultural, and technical issues that universities face in providing distance-learning programs to meet the needs of today and the demands of tomorrow. Universities that fail to adapt risk losing their students to competing local and foreign universities. Key issues discussed in this chapter are university barriers to change, changing needs of students, legal issues, cultural issues, and emerging international educational opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s evolving global economy, information has a short shelf life. To stay competitive, not only scientists and engineers, but all sectors of the workforce must continuously upgrade their skills to stay competitive. Lifelong learning is no longer an option, but a career requirement. Some nontraditional learners who balance family needs and career responsibilities are choosing to enroll in distance-learning programs that suit their busy lifestyles. Instead of spending nights and weekends on a college campus, today’s learners can study at work, at home, and even when traveling. A few years ago, universities saw the eLearning classroom without walls as a way to meet the needs of students throughout their service regions. That view of eLearning has broadened. Today, universities are beginning to realize that their service regions cross state, province, and international borders. The
advent of online learning, which is also referred to as eLearning in this chapter, dramatically increases student access to educational opportunities. In developing countries, eLearning can provide access to learning opportunities never before available. The eLearning revolution empowers learners to study online from grade school to graduate school, earning high school degrees, certificates, diplomas, undergraduate degrees, masters, and doctorates from educational institutions around the world.

Students have become consumers who shop the Internet for their preferred academic programs and delivery methods. Institutions can no longer rely on the traditional post-secondary on-campus student; the demographic has changed. Some may discover too late that fraternities, football, the face-to-face lecture system and 16-week on-campus semesters are not meeting consumer needs. Just as workers must adapt to lifelong learning, so too universities need to recognize that online delivery is an important new market. According to the Asian Development Bank (2008), the interdependence of world markets, communication advances, and technology have created a new educational market for continued training for technical workers, managers, and administrators. Colleges and universities must adapt to the changing demands of the workplace.

In this evolving marketplace, working students understand that they can search the market for the educational products that best meet their needs. Throughout this chapter, the term market is frequently mentioned to emphasize the concept that universities must develop new products and new delivery methods to meet changing student demands if they are to retain their market share. Universities need to develop business plans to identify and develop new programs which meet market needs. In these financially uncertain times, academic institutions must generate more of their operating costs to replace declining government and donor funding. Therefore, institutions must deliver high quality educational programs that are also cost effective. Two challenges that universities face in developing distance-learning programs are their reluctance to adopt a customer-oriented approach (Magaud, 2007) and the resistance of faculty and administrators who believe that distance learning does not have the academic quality of face-to-face training (Wright, Dhanarajan, & Reju, 2009). The economic reality is that institutions of higher education must meet the needs of their customers or risk losing students to competitors (Oblinger, 1999).

According to Adams (2008), private for-profit online universities have been quick to exploit this new academic market, recognizing that working customers and businesses are willing to pay higher tuition in return for shorter academic terms, greater access to courses, flexibility, and the opportunity to earn degrees more quickly. The University of Phoenix, the leader in online for-profit education, has an enrollment of 300,000 students and has generated significant profits (Tanzer, 2007). More recently, public universities like the University of Maryland have entered the international market by actively recruiting international students. In 2008, 10% of the university students were from foreign countries (Wolston, 2009).

This chapter discusses societal, legal, technical, international, and cultural issues facing universities considering online programs. Key issues this chapter discusses are existing barriers to academic change, the growing demand for eLearning, and new competition traditional universities face from higher-education competitors around the world. The chapter also describes barriers that limit the ability of organizations to make the changes needed to compete. The chapter proposes that universities must adjust to changing customer needs in order to remain competitive.