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Book Review – The Virtual University – Models and Messages: Lessons from case studies

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General Comments

Considering that virtual universities have been in existence for several years and that online learning partnerships around the world are growing, it is timely to publish the experiences and lessons learned from the institutions that have pioneered this development. The editor of this book, Susan D'Antoni, provides a valuable resource to those considering establishing a virtual university, or to those already in existence and looking to tweak their approach or model.

A selection of case studies is a practical way to present the various types of institutional models and recent developments in virtual education. This book presents the economic conditions and political considerations that provide impetus for the creation of the virtual institutions worldwide.

The first chapter, *The Virtual University: Models and Messages*, provides readers with context and background needed to illustrate the inherent nature of online education – specifically, that it will be essentially borderless when fully operational. This chapter underscores the fact that globalization and world economic conditions can and do have an impact – either positively or negatively.

The idea of using an established format for the case studies is helpful because it facilitates readers' comprehension of the various comparisons that can be made of the different cases. However, in the next edition, I highly recommend incorporating what has occurred since 2003.

Comments by Chapter

Chapter 2, 'The *new century: societal paradoxes and major trends*,' offers readers valuable context driving the virtual university movement. Topics such as world wealth, technology gains and gaps, restricted access to education, urbanization, globalization, the growth of knowledge, provide readers with the requisite background and foundation to help them mentally situate the rise of virtual institutions.

Chapter 3, '*The university – current challenges and opportunities*,' narrows the book's focus even further to higher education and presents current challenges, fundamental roles of

universities, and societal expectations. The perspective in this chapter is that technology is transforming the availability and accessibility of information, and that this is having an impact on timeworn teaching and learning approaches. The concepts of lifelong learning, digital divide, mobile learning, and learner-driven systems are crucial to the future of education. Flexibility, connectivity, the changing role of the teacher tutor/ trainer is evolving into a higher level of the teaching and learning process. Convergence between learning and working, learning and communicating, and learning and entertainment, are also key points to keep in mind as we attend to the needs of new millennium students.

Chapter 4, '*A world of borderless higher education – impact and implications*,' shows that education delivered through virtual universities crosses conventional boundaries of time, space, and geography. This dynamic, in turn, brings with it both great opportunities and great challenges – and consequences particularly in terms of 'quality assurance.' The rise of corporate universities, consortiums, partnerships, and networks, are a result of available technology, and this dynamic is driving the need of institutions to internationalize to increase enrolment and provide learners with increased access and flexibility. These points are the crux of what motivates countries – and even certain governments – to launch virtual university projects.

Chapter 5 examines *Universiti Tun Abdul Razak* (UNITAR), and provides readers with a solid example of a virtual university operating as a private enterprise in Malaysia, a country that is working to transform its economy into that of a knowledge economy. This chapter provides a description of the start-up processes, the investments required, the operating and management system needed to launch this operation, and the influence of market forces in Malaysia. Describing lessons learned at critical stages of progress through the establishment of UNITAR provides readers with interesting and worthwhile insights.

This chapter could be consolidated, however, because several topics could be organized in such a way as to avoid overlap and repetition. While these headings reappear at different points of evolution of UNITAR, organizing the material differently could reduce some of the repetition.

Chapter 6 examines the context and justification for the creation of the digital campus, *Campus Numérique Francophone,* in Dakar, Sénégal. This chapter outlines public and private sector institutions, government, and the socio-economic realities in Sénégal, and explores the difficulties faced in higher education in Africa. In sum, this chapter helps readers to gain an appreciation of the complex challenges faced by educational institutions in African countries as they seek to expand capacity and increase access. The specific role of *Campus Numérique francophone* within the African higher education system, although limited in scope, is situated clearly as an outgrowth of the African Virtual University.

In my opinion, some detail pertaining to course administration, requirements, and technology could have be trimmed to allow for more descriptive information on lessons that have been learned with this type of set-up, especially in terms of student support services and system-wide collaboration.

Chapter 7 examines *Universitat Virtual de Quilmes* (UVQ), Argentina. International and national contexts are examined to inform readers about state of private university development in Argentina. The rationale to create UVQ is touched upon, and discussions surrounding the concepts of 'no tuition' and 'unrestricted admission' are extremely interesting perspectives examined. Also explored are challenges, arguably faced by most virtual universities, in terms of low graduation rates and the role of part-time faculty members – both issues are clearly important

considerations in any virtual university structure. The importance of a national technology infrastructure and the Internet use in course delivery are likewise investigated in this chapter. For example, the partnership with a private Internet provider, viewed as an investment in this context, is worthy of readers' time and consideration, along with discussion on finding ways to assist poor, cash-strapped students. UVQ's strategy for continuous improvement is also informative.

Overall, this chapter could use some editing in certain parts. Nonetheless, future developments based on the creation of strategic alliances, joint venture agreements, sub-contracting of services, and so forth, are all excellent points touched upon in this chapter.

Chapter 8 examines the *University of Southern Queensland* (USQ), Online. USQ is a dual mode institution that, unlike most dual mode institutions, has a larger proportion of off campus operations than that of on campus. The USQ case provides a thorough description of infrastructure needs, content development processes, services to students, investment requirements, and organizational structure.The key lesson to be learned in the USQ case is that it is incredibly helpful to assists learners at key junctures in their learning journey to ensure they do well. In addition, the costing information related to off campus versus on campus operations is also provided. I personally found the 'evolution models' for distance education in a table format to be very helpful, particularly as a quick reference. A very strong argument for proper instructional design, which is a fundamental building block for distance education and online courses, is also made. The part examining 'e-application' was insightful and refreshing.

In terms of editing, some mention of newly emerging and rapidly evolving social networks such as *Facebook, Myspac*e, *Second Life, Wikipedia,* etc., should have been made simply because these environments are likely going to have an impact on distance learners. Nevertheless, despite this shortcoming, overall, I found this chapter to be well written, clearly organized, and a good example to follow.

Chapter 9 examines *Athabasca University* (AU), Canada. The AU case provides readers with a good working example of a single mode – that is online and distance education – postsecondary institution. AU's unique single mode structure allows for a strategic focus on customer (i.e., student) service – more specifically students studying at a distance from home. Sharing AU's student demographic details helps readers appreciate the need for comprehensive 'student services' in an online environment that caters to students studying at home in Canada or abroad. The course completion rate of 65 percent is a reality in this type of institution, but a graduation rate of 75 percent is a success story.

Also explored in this chapter is today's shifting teaching and learning model as it transitions from a 'solitary professor' to a 'team of professionals' model. This 'team of professionals' model is central to a single mode distance education university; it also clearly underscores the need for first-rate student support services. This chapter also examines how AU established its 'best practices' in responding to student enquiries, facilitating administrative services, etc. AU's flexible residency requirement (i.e., the ability to transfer credits and study from outside Canada) was also an important point raised in this case study. Readers are also cautioned, however, to the emergence of 'degree mills.' As such, this chapter emphasizes the importance of 'branding' in an online environment. 'Credibility' builds 'brand,' and such 'branding' based on reputation is typically achieved via provincial and national accreditation of the institution. In sum, this level of institutional 'branding' helps AU to differentiate itself in a world where 'degree mills' abound. This case also explores the groundwork that takes place prior to enrolling students at AU, specifically by AU's 'student readiness assessment' procedure that is designed to evaluate

whether or not a given student is ready to study a given course or program of study at a distance. In sharing AU's 'lesson learned' about managing partnerships also provides valuable insights for readers. Establishing goals for enrolment (growth) targets within existing programs and establishing parameters around international (off shore) growth provides insight on how to manage such growth domestically and internationally. The AU case also accurately shows readers that the main thing students seek from a virtual university are quality, flexibility, and cost. Nonetheless, students must also be assured that studying at a distance will not hinder future employment. Helping students understanding the credibility of the degree they are seeking to earn will work to reificate the overall market perception and hence, ultimate recognition of the degree as credible.

Overall, this chapter is well written and I am confident readers will find it insightful.

Chapter 10, explores the world of *Kenyatta University – African Virtual University* (AVU) Initially funded by the World Bank to get off the ground, the AVU case offers numerous interesting insights. The primary objective of the AVU project differs from the many other virtual university models covered in this book. Moreover, the AVU case illustrates the multiple and ongoing challenges African countries face in bringing education opportunities to its people. This chapter shows that the traditional model of distributed learning and course brokering remains fraught with challenges and that there remains a serious mismatch between delivery institutions operating in totally different contextual realities versus that of their learners, who are largely desperate for certification and in need of education that is relevant to their world. This case also shows that the concept of exporting education because the technology can enable it is not always the best way forward. This chapter also outlines the steps of development and the difficulties associated with these steps, and illustrate the difficulties faced and efforts needed to keep partnerships alive. Partnerships, without doubt, are essential to virtual universities. This case explores the issue gender, which in itself is clearly a consideration in curriculum development and the provision of student services. The dependency and difficulties of the AVU administrative model impresses upon readers that the 'learning centre model' currently plays second fiddle to the host institution, and that institutional 'branding' is often very difficult to achieve when you are perceived to be 'second fiddle'. In addition, although real and perceived competition is taking place between AVU and its partner universities, the virtual university model is evolving and it is gaining momentum, and as a result, has much greater potential to positively influence many students in Africa.

The chapter is well written and easy to follow and exposes clearly the challenges that must be overcome.

Chapter 11 explores the world of *L'Université virtuelle en pays de la Loire,* France. This case describes an interesting collaboration comprised of several universities across France. The overall context and the international contexts, however, were extensive and somewhat hard to follow and as such, some clarity could have been helpful. The section outlining the institutional context, including purpose of the consortium, its strengths, and the opportunity to capitalize on the *savoir-faire* that exists within these institutions is coherently presented. The section describing the creation of the consortium, organizational structure, technological structure and intellectual property contain some detail that could be edited down, however. The description of the UVPL's development and management shows these to be complex structures that seem somewhat unwieldy. The outline on UVPL's teaching and learning processes could also be shortened. The lessons learned and the recommendation section on policy development, planning and management nonetheless was insightful and clearly important to include. This chapter also

explores the financial needs of such a comprehensive structure, and impresses upon readers the need for periodical assessment of its purpose and value.

Chapter 12 focuses on the case of *Netvarsity*, India. This chapter examines *Netvarsity* international context along with its relationship with its creator, India's National Institute of Information Technology (NIIT). Unlike previous chapters, this particular chapter reveals a much different type of intuitional entity – specifically that this particular virtual university is the child of a leading, worldwide information technology training company. And it is clear that NIIT enjoys a handsome profit margin that enables it to fund such an initiative! *Netvarsity's* creation of a sizable 'student loan program' is commendable, and is shown to support increased enrolment and ensure access. This funding strategy also demonstrates that profit found in 'tuition fees' are a major factor driving the decision to support skill-building and higher education. However, this institution has no degree granting authority, and the credentialing and its market recognition are not well documented in this case study. Moreover, while NIIT's vision and ambition is clearly described, its reputation and 'branding' in the larger market place remains undefined. Nonetheless, including a privately owned, technology skill-building institution in this book's mix of chapters provides readers opportunity to compare and contrast, draw parallels and differences. Still the bottom line is that *Netvarsity*, without articulation agreements or recognition of training by formal higher education institutions in place, would likely have less market value in, say, North America. Indeed, the lesson to be gained from this chapter is all about the viability of a purely Internet-based skill building organization that operates without direct links to the formal education system. On another note, I found the concept of developing "skillets" – something akin to learning objects – very interesting. Also, the comment made that the Internet can make traditional instructor-led training more effective, but that it does not replace, was an astute point to raise.

Chapter 13 entitled ' *Messages and lessons learned*,' is the final chapter in Susan D'Antoni's collection of very enlightening case studies. Having a summary chapter was a great idea. However, the next edition of this book could benefit by pulling together more of the key learnings and commonalities, and help reader to draw clear differences between the various case studies.This chapter could also have benefited by including remarks about the international context of the countries involved, and draw conclusions about the potential for e-learning within this highly diversified, global mix.A commentary section or observations from those charged with peer reviewing this book, could also enrich it greatly. For example, such comments and observations could be organized under themes such as: 1) institutional models; 2) leadership; 3) policy and political context; 4) economic realities; 5) human resources availability; 6) sustainability; 7) societal readiness; 8) international perspective etc.

Overall, I found this book to be an excellent resource, and would recommend it to those working in a virtual university or those trying to introduce e-learning in a traditional university.

Athabasca University