

Liverpool Laureate

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The Liverpool Laureate offers a wholly online, relatively large-scale example of online postgraduate degree programmes.

Material for this snapshot was compiled from interview with Professor Paul Leng, Computer Sciences Faculty, Liverpool University, on 27th January 2009.

Tags:

HE, Postgraduates, Work-based learners, Learning Platform, Distance learning

Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Technology confident effective providers

Enabling infrastructure and processes

Sectors:

HE

Innovation

Postgraduate degree programmes at Liverpool University are delivered wholly online. The target group is 'people employed in a professional role who would find it difficult to do a Master's degree full time.'

It is thought that the Liverpool initiative differs from other online courses because most other ways of doing this impose restrictions, for example, students have to make day release arrangements, or be near the university.

It is also thought to be 'on a different scale.' From an initial cohort of seventeen students doing the IT degree in 2000, in 2009 there are now 4,000 'enrolled and active students' on an expanding programme, which it is expected will accommodate between 10,000 and 20,000 over the next few years. Precise figures for annual completions were not available but a total of 2545 students completed programmes successfully between 2003 and 2008.

Background

Liverpool University has offered online postgraduate programmes since April 2000. The initiative evolved from an online IT course developed in conjunction with an Israel-based company in 1998-99, to the current partnership with an international training organisation, Laureate.

Laureate operates out of Amsterdam, with Head Quarters in Baltimore, USA. The courses available at Liverpool range from business administration, to computer science and public health.

The University is responsible for all academic programmes and the awarding of degrees. Laureate deals with the operational issues including the hiring and deployment of tutors, subject to the University's approval.

The initiative was developed to offer an online qualification – a dissertation-based Master's course, of the same standard as the campus-based degrees. For each course, eight modules are taught over eight weeks, in a virtual classroom of around 20 students, followed by the dissertation phase. Students register online and are placed in a class with an instructor, engaged and paid for by Laureate, having been approved by the university.

According to Prof Leng, the online learning was designed to be, *“very immediate, very discussion-based, high-touch and very tightly scheduled, much more so than, for example, the Open University.”*

Modules are studied 'within a rigid framework'. Every Thursday, course materials, which can be in different media but are mainly text-based, are placed in electronic folders for students. Over the following week, assignments are handed to instructors to mark, with feedback within three to four days of the week's end. There is very little flexibility to the structure, but this is seen to be one of its strengths. Students cannot realistically take more than one week out. Any absences can be quickly identified and problems followed up.

Central to the programme is the discussion group, including peer evaluation. Online group discussion is embedded in the learning experience. Students are encouraged to critique each other's work and this exchange of ideas is thought by students to be particularly valuable in gaining perspectives from others who may work in very different industries or come from different, international backgrounds.

Another feature of the programme is the online assessment process. Week-by-week assessment is by instructor, monitored by a university academic, who has continuous free access to all the coursework, individual and group contributions, as well as the marks awarded and instructor feedback. Assessment criteria for instructors are clear and explicit. Marks are also

awarded for participation and students are graded 'outstanding', 'good', 'marginal' or 'fail'. Prof Leng commented:

"Some students would prefer a system that would include more detailed ranking, for example a GPA as in the USA, but the culture of the Virtual Classroom is collaborative rather than competitive."

It was thought that a finer-grade system, different from that which is used for the campus-based programmes, would cause moderating difficulties.

Technology

The BlackBoard VLE has replaced previous media including FirstClass. The only technologies which students need are a PC with internet connection. The course is delivered entirely online, from registration to participation in groups, interaction with instructors, assignments, feedback and assessment.

Teaching and learning

Structured, focused discussion is an integral part of the pedagogy. In relation to how the online programme fits with the campus-based programmes, it offers the same qualification, with the same requirement for students to write a dissertation. The recommended time period for completion is four years, although there is some inbuilt flexibility up to six years. Student Support Managers at Laureate encourage students to maintain a good learning pace.

Impact

In terms of outcomes, Prof Leng stresses that direct comparisons cannot be made with the campus model postgraduate degree courses because it is quite a different venture.

As is usual for courses, the University Board of Studies receives twice-yearly end-of-module reports, a process which picks up any key issues or problems.

In terms of student retention, the majority of students complete the course and many, including those based outside the UK, attend the degree-awarding ceremonies. In terms of student expectations, students report:

"Although the course is more demanding than anticipated, they [students] enjoy the challenge."

The perceived impact on students' working life is that, although study has to be fitted in around working hours, students are highly motivated to do the course.

Challenges

In terms of what the university wants, there is a recognised tension between commercial and academic pressures as Prof Leng points out:

“Laureate has a clear motivation to recruit more students and teach more cheaply, but the university has its reputation to maintain for small classes and high quality teaching.”

Wider adoption

In three to five years, the post-graduate programme is likely to have expanded to include other subject areas, some of which are already in a highly competitive field. For its adoption in the early years of undergraduate programmes, or in further education, this was less likely, not necessarily because of different assessment procedures, but because the online discussion element of the course requires participation levels that less mature students may find difficult.

Instead of a full online undergraduate programme emerging, Prof Leng envisages that a ‘sandwich mode of learning’ may develop, with the first year of the course done on campus, the rest whilst working in a company. However, there is a recognition that the online learning tools which enable new modes of learning are only part of the picture. The pedagogic framework is both much more scheduled and discussion-oriented than most online postgraduate programmes.

“It’s not about the technology; it’s the pedagogy which is the key.”