

E-University: British Experience

Abstract

It is clear that e-University attempt in the UK was not successful. The failure has various reasons which have been discussed in this paper. Further, this experience has thought many lessons to other potential institutions that want to establish e-University venture. It is important to note that e-University would be one of option and could be considered an opportunity for many. However, what it is clear this kind of venture is more expensive and slower than the traditional university setting and running. There are huge amount of uncertainty and mistrust on the diplomas, certificates, awards of e-University, e-learning and online higher education. In other words, apart from the USA' s experience and delivery, institutions and companies still have difficulties to convince their prospective students for these courses and programme. However, it can be assumed that e-University in future would be one of the main higher education institutions.

Keywords: *e-University, e-learning, Online Higher Education, Venture, University*

1-Introduction

It is important to note that when internet become available widely, several people thought that the future of the universities more likely rely on this development and a new type of internet based university education would be imminent. This thinking leads people to search a new venture, namely e-university. For this reason, British government initiated a project on the issue and had tried to achieve for four years.

According to Garrett, ‘in February 2000, with much fanfare the British government announced funding of £62 million for a national, commercial e-University (UKeU). ...the government announced in February 2004 that the project had failed to meet recruiting targets, and it quickly became clear that the initiative would not survive’ (Garrett, 2004, p. 4).

This quote clearly indicates that exactly four year, the British government had waited and tried to pursue this project. Then the government made a decision to halt the project. This study is about this four years project and tries to find answer why was the project initiated and what were the reasons to halt the project? In order to understand the e-University properly, one needs to explore difference between e-University and online higher education.

Initially we start with to analysis differences between e-University and online higher education which has begun in ‘the University of Phoenix Online and the University of Maryland University College’ (Garrett, 2004, p. 4) then spread out other part of the world. In the second part of the study, we try to answer the first question from primary and secondary sources. After completing this part, then we try to find answer for the second question. During trying to find answer for this question, we try to bring other discussions on the topic which took place out of the UK.

2-e-University and Online Higher Education

In the first time, the term of e-University was not used. Virtual university was used first time in 1990s. One explains how this usage comes into existence as:
...from the early 1990s, under the impact of information technology in general and the Internet in particular, a new paradigm emerged. This is to use the Internet for all the teaching in a virtual university – thus courses would be “delivered” to the student with a PC at home (or at work – and sometimes in a learning centre) and the student would interact via e-mail and Web pages. Increasingly, people use the term e-University for this. In the past, many other terms were prevalent, each with their own nuancing(sic) – online university, net university, etc (Bacsich, 2004)

When we look at the story, the term derived from the developments of internet and PC which could be seen as ‘a new paradigm emerged’. As consequences of this paradigm, e-University means ‘courses would be “delivered” to the student with a PC at home (or at work – and sometimes in a learning centre) and the student would interact via e-mail and Web pages’ (Bacsich, 2004). A further definition is seen from the same source as: Accredited university-level institutions delivering degree-awarding courses, with a substantial percentage delivered at a distance, with a substantial percentage of these using e-learning. If there is a face-to-face university at the core, we expect the courses delivered at a distance to come from a separately

named part of the university, and to be referenced from a high level of the university Web site by such phrases as “Virtual Campus”, “Online Service” or some such (Bacsich, 2004). Now it is understood that ‘accredited university-level institutions’ must be an important element in this definition. This term has been begun used in the UK in 1997 ‘when various UK universities launched their versions of a virtual campus’ (Bacsich, 2004). On the other hand, Online Higher Education is ‘a web-based educational training institute offering undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate degree programs to prospective students from around the world’ (Kaplan University Online, 2001 - 2012). From this definition and others develop similar approaches. Therefore, it means to provide web-based modules for undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate degree programs. When we look at these two definitions, it seems that the both models have more similarities than the differences. However, it is important to note that ‘Online Higher Education’ is a part of the real institutions and they provide these courses as part of their normal curriculum (face-to-face).

The recent developments indicate that there are institutions who only offer online higher education to prospective students from around the world. For example, ‘Web-based higher education is growing quickly, ...The number of people taking advantage of online education is increasing by about 13 percent each year’ (Online Education.org, 2012). This is in the USA. In addition, the other parts of the world have similar development on Online Higher Education; and this trend should be continued.

However, one needs not to mix the term of e-learning with e-University and online higher education. The reason is that e-learning means ‘E-learning may be seen as the latest version of attempts to increase learning opportunities by replacing academic staff with technology’ (Roscoe, 2007). The other two education system has academic staff to teach, but in the e-learning, academic staff is replaced by technology.

In short, it clear that human being and educators continue to find new teaching ways in order to improve education and teaching in higher educations. As we all accept that we are now in the age of technology.

3-British e-University Experiment

In order to understand the question, we need to go back to 1997 and onward, and try to see what kind of developments were taking place in the UK’s higher education. Initially, the Labour Party came to power by saying ‘Education, Education, Education’ (Hill, 2002) in 1997 as a part of their election manifestation. The UK Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett announced the launch of a ‘UK e-University’, proposing collaboration between top universities (Davis, 2003). In other words, the Labour government wanted to improve not only primary and secondary education but also higher education. So this e-University proposal was one of important turning points in their educational pledge. In order to understand more clearly, one needs to look at Blunkett speech on 19 July 1999. According to the BBC, ‘Mr Blunkett identified four key policy areas - modernising the comprehensive system, raising standards, developing pre-school education and promoting social inclusion’ (BBC, 1999). In here, e-University might have been part of the ‘modernising the comprehensive system, raising standards and promoting social inclusion’. In other words, everyone who wants to continue their further and higher education become able to enrol in the e-university which would be modern, place and time are not necessary. Further,

thousands, even hundred thousand would be able to enrol in this type of university without any 'elitist' selection.

a-A Pilot Project for a UK e-university

There was a great belief that e-learning, e-University and online higher education would be the future. None wants to miss this opportunity. In addition, it is important to remember that there were developments on this issue in somewhere else. For example, as Hill and other state:

Pearsons publishers teamed up with an American virtual university and Henley Management College formed a virtual university partnership with the accountants and consultants Ernst & Young Overseas, Phoenix University was launched as a private e-University in the USA generating \$12 800 000 from on-line and distance learning courses.

Consequently, this initial project were seen a very important turning point in British higher education history. Then, 'it was envisaged as a way for the UK higher education institutions to enter large-scale online delivery, penetrate overseas markets and offer more learning flexibility for domestic students. The UK government initially committed £62 million (this figure was later adjusted to £55 million) to the project, with the expectation that investment from the private sector would also be elicited' (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2005). In this statement, it is clear that the government wanted the UK higher education institutions to 'penetrate overseas markets and offer more learning flexibility for domestic students'. Thirdly the government wanted to bring in the private sector in to this new business initiative as well.

UKeU 'was a private company (with around fifty staff), majority owned by the U.K. higher education sector. It did not award its own degrees, instead contracting with U.K universities to offer theirs. The company focused on infrastructure development, course development support, quality assurance, and marketing. The target audiences were primarily (1) international graduate students who wished to study online rather than come to the UK and (2) the private business sector (businesses wanting customized degree-level training for staff, for example)' (Garrett, 2004, p. 4).

According to another source, UKeU has business managers in nine countries and has 26 local partners in 16 countries who help market its degrees and provide premises and support for students. By November last year 16 UK universities were offering courses via UKeU, mainly in business and management, environmental studies, science and technology. But universities complained privately that UKeU was charging too much for retailing their degrees abroad when they were developing the courses themselves. These complaints, and the evidence that pure undiluted online learning doesn't work except for the most committed students, have prompted a Hefce's change of direction (MacLeod, 2004).

What has happened? I assume that the following statement tell the history/story of this new business opportunity and a pilot of e-University project.

The first online courses were launched in March 2003, and by November 900 students had been recruited. However, with predicted enrolment figures of one million students by UKeU's tenth year of operation, actual student take-up proved disappointing. In addition, private investment, seen as a key feature of UKeU's business model had not been secured. As a consequence, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which had administered the funding on behalf of the government labelled UKeU unviable in April 2004 and closed the venture (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2005).

The expectations and prediction basically were not met, and then the best decision on the project made by the HEFCE after exactly four year later of the project had started that is to stop all activities of the project.

b-The Reasons to Halt the Project

According to the Guardian news paper,

The venture launched in 2000 at the height of the dotcom boom by the then education secretary, David Blunkett, as a worldwide 21st century successor to the Open University. As a series of universities around the world have discovered, there is less demand for online study than enthusiasts predicted and UKeU looks like becoming the latest to get its fingers burned financially by investing in online learning. Instead of selling online degrees abroad, the aim will now be to use what remains of the taxpayers' funding to support e-learning programmes at individual universities and colleges for home and overseas students. The funding council said that universities were more interested in "blended" learning involving a mixture of IT, traditional, work-based and distance learning to meet the diverse needs of students - rather than concentrating on wholly e-based learning. (MacLeod, 2004).

Consequently, it has been said that the expectations and predictions of the project were not met in the prescribed time scale. This is quite obvious reason. However, in this heading, the article tries to articulate whether the government had done everything to bring this project into life or was there any other reasons. In other words, as it was stated in the one of the parliament reports. The UK e-University project was effectively wound up last year by HEFCE, having spent £50 million of public money but having succeeded only in attracting 900 students. We inquired into the issue to find out why this had happened, what lessons could be learnt from the failure of the project, and to consider the future for e-learning and e-Universities in the UK (HC 205 , 2005).

So this paper to some extent investigates this report and tries to highlight important points which had been raised.

Firstly, the report states that 'it took a supply-driven rather than demand led approach' (HC 205 , 2005 , p. 3). In here, we understand that there was no demand for this new product in the country and the initiative had to create demand while it was supplying the goods. Secondly, the report also puts stress on another important market term which is 'an inability to work in effective partnership with the private sector' (HC 205 , 2005 , p. 3). In other words, the private sectors initially had not been convinced about the goods as well as possible outcome of the market. These two initial statements are clearly mistake and inability of the government (who run the project). In addition their inability, the project managers had been awarded of 'bonuses to senior executives of UK e-U' (HC 205 , 2005

, p. 3). This drawn public attention and had been complained. Despite, this ‘bonus scheme and potential share packages are examples of the anomalies that were caused by the fact that the structure and systems were set up under the assumption that private investment would be part of the project’ (HC 205 , 2005 , p. 3). It seems that the managers started with a wrong doing which would have been very much depend on the partnership and incomes. It can be argued that as the report states ‘for either the private sector or the public sector the bonuses paid to senior staff were wholly unacceptable and morally indefensible’ (HC 205 , 2005 , pp. 3-4) and psychologically aimed at killing the project.

It is worth to state another reason which I fully agree with as stated ‘confusing existed between the mainstream U.K. education brand emphasizing the three elements of tradition, place, and quality and marking by UKeU that promised “the best of U.K. higher education with online convenience” without being able to utilize these elements’ (Garrett, 2004, p. 4). In the reports, there is other information why this project fails. Some of them are detailed explanation of the above mentioned points. Further points raised in the report are as follow: a- issues around the general operation of the venture (covering recommendations 2-11, 13, 14, 24-26);

b-ccountability issues(primarily recommendations 12, 15-23);
relating to UKeU structure;

b.1- relating to HEFCE;

b.2- relating to DfES;

b.3-the way ahead on e-learning(recommendations 27-32) (HC 205 , 2005 , p. 1).

It seems that there is no need to look at these areas in detail, because the report and the government’s respond to this report already have highlighted. However, for the purpose of this study, it is much better to look at what lessons have been drawn from this experience.

c-Lessons Learned

It is important to note that there are many lessons drawn from this experience in term of e-University as well as e-learning and other internet related learning activities in the higher education of the UK and other part of the World.

The first lesson is that ‘dotcom’ ventures and related markets had changed dramatically within very short time. In the beginning of the year 1997 till 1999, there was a kind of ‘e-business mania’ (Pidduck, 2000) which had been consumed about a few years and many e-business companies had liquidated. During this period, the government announced the e-University project in 2000 and the actual activity took place in 2003 when nearly e-business companies were about disappearing. ‘Similarly, eLearning has taken a different course than the venture anticipated, with greater focus on eLearning blended with elements of campus-based or distance learning, rather than wholly Internet-based learning’ (HC 489, 18 October 2005, p. 3). When these two came together, there was no other option rather than failing.

There was a good example in the US in this kind of venture which relies on two important reasons, namely ‘the dot-com boom presented online delivery as an alternative to the conventional campus rather than as a supplemented, as has more often turned out to be the case. ...online delivery outside the United States has (with key exceptions) yet to attain

sufficient status, scale, and sophistication to succeed' (Garrett, 2004, p. 4). These inform that it is not quite easier to run e-University, if there is no good 'online delivery' system which links the e-University to the potential customers.

The second lesson is 'the public sector should not shrink from high risk projects' (HC 489, 18 October 2005, p. 4). The reason is very obvious that the public sector does not act as quick as the private sector if there is a high risk in any business activities. The losses of the public sector in this kind of high risk venture is always higher than the private sector if one needs to compare with them. This is explained in the report as 'senior management should have had either very clear accountability for the expenditure of public money, or risk from market pressures to succeed through private investment in the project' (HC 205, 2005, p. 25). This could be avoided if the e-University 'was to be jointly funded by public and private investment in equal shares, there was an accountability structure and framework intended to protect public funds' (HC 489, 18 October 2005, p. 5).

The third lesson is that importance for 'high quality advice to be available to an accounting officer. It is necessary to be able to understand what a delivery agent is doing and to be able to mount effective and appropriate challenges where necessary, while avoiding duplication of effort' (HC 489, 18 October 2005, p. 6). In contrast, the government did not agree with the recommendation of the report. It seems that this type of request is important in order to protect the wrong usage of the public money. The fourth lesson is that people who would manage the e-University project were not specialised to run this project.

Finally, it is clear that this project initially thought a private business venture which had to be run by bureaucrats. It was wrong. Any private business venture should be run by private companies within the market rules in order to be successful.

d-There were some recommendations

The recommendations are all about how any government or any department of the government should continue their role in this sector. These are as follow:

- The Government must deliver on its commitment to outline its strategy, and action plan for its implementation, for embedding e-learning in HE in a full and sustainable way;
- The Government, through HEFCE, ensures that thorough and robust market research is undertaken for use by the whole sector in order to maintain the UK interests in the global market for e-learning, keeping in mind the commercial sensitivity of such research, and the potential for collaborative projects between FE and HE sectors;
- We recommend that the Government, through HEFCE, clarifies how it intends to invest in and support collaborative ventures in e-learning both across the HE sector, and between the FE and HE sector, in a way that provides equal opportunity and advantage to all those who would wish to be involved in the global market for e-learning;
- The Government, through HEFCE, must clarify its national strategy for developing e-learning in the UK and how it intends to invest in and support e-learning across the HE sector in a way that provides coherent progress (HC 205, 2005, pp. 31-38).

e-Conclusion

It seems that this experience gives clear information why the UK e-University project failed. The demand of market is very important for any kind of business venture including education. Further, there is a great risk, if someone tries to create supply without the demand. Secondly, technological development in communication technology and computer is important and significant. 'E-learning has a vital and exciting role to play in higher education because it empowers learners, enables teaching to be more creative and innovative, and enables students to develop skills of value in the workplace' (MacLeod, 2004). However, there are huge amount of areas where is not clearly visible for many. This gray areas of the technology needs to be more visible in order to set up a business venture. However, every day there is a growing amount of e-learning and online courses in the higher education around the world. Still there is no clear data available how much these kind of education successful if one compares with the traditional higher educational delivery.

The HEFCE statement said that 'Much has been learnt through the e-Universities project - both by the company, and by the participating universities and colleges and students. It is essential to capitalise on this experience as higher education institutions further develop their e-learning programmes. The project has also provided many important lessons about the potential use of new technologies in higher education' (MacLeod, 2004). Finally, there are still a long way to go before implementing e-university, e-learning as well as online higher educational programmes.

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