

Introduction

Universities that focus on providing distance education (DE) are in a uniquely vulnerable position as technology widens the opening through which competitors can adopt DE andragogy, adapt their own curriculum, and market to the same students who make up the primary cohort in distance teaching universities (DTU). Andragogy is used purposefully in this context to describe both male and female DE students who are typically adults who wish to increase knowledge of a subject for personal non-business reasons or to “develop or upgrade the skills and knowledge needed in employment” (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 161 – 163). Rumble (2004) further explains that DTUs were specifically created to meet the needs of these part-time students who were either unable to attend traditional campus-based universities (CBU) prior to beginning employment or who want to gain additional knowledge or certifications as working adults with families and other responsibilities. Thus, the market for DTUs was a group of students who did not interest CBUs (Rumble, 2004). Then the pool of teaching organizations who could take advantage of the flexibility of technology and technological advances increased as information and communications technology (ICT) became more prevalent and ubiquitous. DTUs, therefore, became increasingly vulnerable to having their student population poached by CBUs and dual mode universities (DMU) determined to increase their academic footprint.

A Summary of the Vulnerability Debate

In Rumble’s (2004) *Papers and Debates on the Costs and Economics of Distance Education and Online Learning*, several experts discuss the idea that DTUs are increasingly vulnerable to CBUs and DMUs. Ultimately cost is a critical factor because costing methods made DTUs appear both economically efficient and effective (Rumble, 2004). However, the limitations of DTUs include factors that adversely impact the perception of efficiency, namely that:

- DTUs are not truly competing on common ground with CBUs and DMUs because they cannot offer the same wide-range of courses,
- Increasing student support, which may be required to better compete, impacts direct cost per student and reduces the perceived cost-efficiency of DTUs,

- Where CBUs and DMUs can share course development and material costs across both F2F and DE teachers and students, DTUs cannot,
- The marginal costing approach supports lower pricing at CBUs and DMUs thus potentially undercutting course pricing at DTUs, and
- DMUs can add flexible part-time students to campus-based courses and possibly improve cost-efficiency by using supplementary teaching methods which is something that DTUs do not have the flexibility to do.

Rumble (2004) goes on to identify four strengths of DTUs. He argues that DTUs are uniquely suited to DE because

- DTUs are dedicated DE institutions,
- Adult learners will benefit from DTUs because they are the focus of DTUs,
- DTUs naturally develop bench strength and in-depth expertise in their DE processes, technology and student support services, and
- DTUs are considered to be more cost-efficient than CBU and DMU campus-based courses (Rumble, 2004).

Dual-mode universities are also examined and identified as a significant concern for DTUs because of their potential to compete with DTUs in areas specific to DTUs and in areas associated with CBUs (Rumble, 2004). DTUs are therefore vulnerable to DMUs from the perspective of competition in courses offered and because DMUs can take advantage of the marginal costing approach when charging for courses.

In response to Rumble's argument, Mugridge (2004) puts forth that the issue is not one of competition, but an opportunity for collaboration and White (2004) argues that DTUs have a "superior quality differential" and thus are in a better position than CBUs as a whole and better positioned to partner and transform into a DMU which may be the future of DTUs (p. 91). Keegan (2004) in his response to Rumble does not express concern for DTUs because he believes that DTUs are uniquely positioned to take advantage of technological advances and that they have the competitive advantage in terms of large numbers of forecasted enrollments.

Exponential Increases in Technology and the Impact on DTUs and HE

Keegan (2004) states that the technologies coming online will require a level of expertise unique to DTU educators and that expecting that CBU educators would take advantage of the wealth of available technologies is unmerited. However, companies are approaching teachers with promises to show them how to effectively use technology in the classroom so technologies are not necessarily beyond campus-based teachers (Habisch, 2010). Thus, the fact that DTUs got to the technologies first becomes less important as technologies are evaluated, incorporated and adopted as a part of courses and course curriculums.

Strengthening or Weakening Rumble

Rumble's (2004) argument that DTUs are in a vulnerable position is strengthened by the technology trend and the continuing exponential increases in the use of technology and the types of technologies available for use. Financial obstacles, pedagogical/andragogical concerns and accessibility are lessening as obstacles to employing activities that have historically been the purview of DTUs. In addition, the argument that collaboration is the next step is doubtful given the general tendency for traditional academics to resist change (Rumble, 2004a). If anything, the arguments against the vulnerability of DTUs further support Rumble's apprehension that competition is growing. Although DTUs can claim superior quality in their materials, and more expertise in technologies, institutions on top can choose whether or not to collaborate while those at risk must consider alliances and partnerships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rumble's (2004) analysis of the increasing vulnerability of DTUs is an accurate assessment of the challenges facing single-mode DE institutions. Competition from CBUs and DMUs is imminent given the increasing popularity of technology and companies poised to provide teacher training and support. Although there are costing approaches that have previously supported the idea that DTUs are more cost-efficient than CBUs and DMUs, the marginal costing approach is a development that allows for pricing flexibility in the other two institution modes and this provides a challenge to DTUs claim of economic efficiency. Lastly collaboration should not be seen as a next step, but more of a last resort and this is effectively the nail in the coffin. Rumble's primary example, the competition that the

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Open University United Kingdom is experiencing, should serve as a caution and promote vigilance on the part of all DTUs regardless of their current lack of competition.

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