Searching for Academic and Organizational Model of e-Universities

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore and propose an academic administration and organizational model appropriate for enhancing the educational quality of digital distance universities. This study employs a comprehensive cross analysis of a diverse set of information including literature review, analysis of e-universities, survey of expert opinions, benchmark analysis of e-Learning enterprises, and survey of e-universities. We propose an academic administration and organization model for successful educational service. This model shows that e-universities should be equipped with detailed services on both the faculty and staff sides of the academic administration, instruction-learning support, student aid, and educational evaluation, and that these services also need support in the form of organization. The model also emphasizes flexibility and dynamism that connects services and organizations and enables timely provision of services and top-level receptiveness.

Introduction

Purpose of the study

Organized and practical efforts to improve the quality of education are called for immediately with the unparalleled expansion in its size and diversification in its services. A part of such efforts is research on academic administration and organization model that can accommodate diversities in distance education types, services, technologies, and students.

Eaton (2001) stated that digital distance universities (e-universities) face challenges in various aspects of academic administration and organization model compared to traditional offline universities as follows:

(1) Autonomy in governance: Autonomy and independence of a university have been protected as key elements in academic development. The lack of spatial limitation and need for active cooperation and partnership has led to an extreme argument to abolish the principle of autonomy. Independence and autonomy of e-universities from possible political and economic pressure, however, should still be protected.

(2) Cohesion in decision-making system: Cohesion in decision-making systems in a unit’s organization has been respected as an important element for efficient management. As a result, the administrative structure of universities has been studied in many respects from a spatial arrangement to human resource allocation in order to ensure constituent participation. Considering that this value was originally considered in terms of single campuses, digital distance universities might face challenges: digital distance universities have a dispersed faculty with a considerable number of part-time faculty and even virtual administrators. In such situations as cyber organizations, an electronic decision-making system is being considered as a more efficient alternative to the traditional one.

(3) Faculty: The academic authority of faculty has been at the heart of academic institutions. Despite the challenge of distance education that lack of personal and moral education may render academic authority unnecessary, the academic authority of faculty is still essential to ensure educational quality. Impersonal instruction tends to undermine faculty authority and alternative ways to recover their authority are needed.

(4) Academic degrees: University completes its fundamental task by conferring an academic degree to its students. An academic degree, as an indication of general human resources, can no longer meet the society’s demand stemming from diversification and specialization in industries and vocations.
This brought about various certifications and job training institutions. Recently, universities also opened several certification programs, and digital distance universities were perceived as an effective alternative to cope with new social demands. Academic degrees as a principle of traditional academic administration and organizational model face a serious challenge, and a more flexible academic administration and organizational model is called for that can support functional division and balance between academic degree and certification.

(5) General education: A university has its origin in general education. More broadly, education itself started as general education. Recently, as specialization in academic disciplines and vocations grows, general education is given less attention, especially in digital distance universities. A university without general education, however, is unimaginable, and the e-university, with its lack of face-to-face education, needs general education more than the traditional offline university.

(6) Campus: The university campus means more than its spatial boundaries and plays a role in shaping educational substance. In fact, facilities at universities have been an important factor that determines the quality of education. For digital distance universities, the campus and facilities are in cyber space. They need flexible virtual communities, and the quality of the virtual campus is far more emphasized as a factor to determine educational quality in digital distance universities.

The purpose of this study is to explore and propose an academic administration and organizational model appropriate for enhancing the educational quality of digital distance universities. It can be utilized as an alternative solution to the problems that digital distance universities in Korea and other countries have experienced with inappropriate academic administration and organizational structure and the future evaluation of digital distance universities.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs a comprehensive cross analysis of a diverse set of information that enhances the quality of the research product.

(1) Literature Review
An administrative and organizational framework is derived from a literature review on domestic/international accreditation criteria for digital distance universities and academic administration and organization models. The framework is applied to analyses of web sites that digital distance universities are running, a survey of expert opinions, and a current survey of domestic and international digital distance universities.

(2) Analysis of Web Sites
Analyses are performed on web sites for current academic administration and organizational structure of domestic and international digital distance universities.

(3) Survey of expert opinions
Eighteen experts in the areas of instructional technology, information & computer engineering, and educational administration participated in the survey. We requested a 5-scale response on the importance of each element of academic administration and organization in digital distance universities. We also requested four experts to design an academic administration and organization model in detail.

(4) Benchmark analysis of domestic distance education enterprises
Two leading distance education companies are analyzed as a benchmark. The analysis uses the same factors used in the expert survey.

(5) Current survey of digital distance universities
We surveyed current situations of nine domestic digital distance universities that opened in 2001 and six domestic digital distance universities that opened in March 2002. We also surveyed 4 digital distance universities in the US and Australia by way of questionnaires, interviews (e-mail, telephone, and on-site), site visits, and web site analysis.
Literature Review

Evaluation and accreditation standards as a quality control mechanism for digital distance universities have been widely studied in England, America and Australia where digital distance universities had an early start. In order to draw practical implications for the quality control of distance education institutions in Korea, we reviewed several representative accreditation bodies such as ODLQC (Open and Distance Learning Quality Council), CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation), NEA (National Education Association), WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education), and AFT (American Federation of Teachers).

The common elements we found in the quality control mechanisms for digital distance universities are:

1. Institutional Context and Commitment: It is a fundamental principle that a distance university articulates its ideals, educational goals and methods to its students and the community and that its educational programs conform to them.

2. Curriculum and Instruction: Educational quality is a decisive factor in digital distance universities that is determined by the fitness of the curriculum that fully embodies pedagogical principles. It hinges on the extent to which the instructors with academic expertise accommodate the complex and multi-faceted educational demand of the students.

3. Faculty Support: The role of faculty in digital distance universities needs diversification and readjustment, considering, especially, the new instructional environment of digital distance universities in which development of instructional materials and delivery of instruction may be performed by different parties.

4. Student Support: University students in the 21st century distinguish themselves from traditional students, both demographically and spatially, and this requires a completely new student support system, from admission policy--such as public relations, recruitment of new students, and entrance procedure--to the library system.

5. Evaluation and Assessment: The new technology in education gives rise to a new task of evaluation and measurement of not only academic performance of students but also the overall curriculum and organizational management system in digital distance universities. The critical issues such as identification of the student participation in the instruction and tests, the integral evaluation of learning, and protection of private information for accurate evaluation of students' academic achievement need continual innovation. The assessment of the effectiveness of the overall program should use a diverse set of measurements such as attainment of the planned outcomes, enrollment rate of the continuing students, student satisfaction level, and cost-effectiveness.

Survey of Expert Opinions

In a survey of 18 Korea’s domestic experts in distance learning who work in areas such as instructional technology, information & computer engineering, and educational administration, all agreed that the single most important element in the area of academic administration in digital distance universities is ‘quality of contents’. The technology base, including the network, software, and hardware, was also identified as an important element. Subcategories of curriculum management such as curriculum elements (semester system, course requirements, GPA requirements), quality control of learning (attendance check, evaluation method, class size), and diploma (authority for diploma conferment, diploma type) are also regarded as important elements in the survey. Qualification requirements for faculty also appeared in the list of important elements.

Interestingly, domestic distance learning experts and international literature on quality assessment of digital distance universities agree in emphasizing common elements. The common key elements in the area of academic administration for a successful distance university are (1) quality of contents, (2) technology base for distance learning, (3) curriculum management, and (4) faculty quality standards. Also notable are tuition by credit, reduction of the number of courses allowed per semester or the introduction of a multi-term system, practical/interdisciplinary curriculum, and support for enhancement of e-learning capability. As to the organization model, it is pointed out that digital distance universities should leave behind the framework for traditional offline universities with the emphasis on securing faculty support staff and education quality control systems and on redefining and clarifying the roles of faculty and staff.
Benchmark Analysis of e-Learning Enterprises

We analyze as a benchmark two of the most recognized for-profit distance education service companies in Korea (Company A, Company B). The analysis focuses on the same elements used in the expert survey. Company A provides two-tier services of training and development of specialties for teachers and of general and business-to-business education. Company B is an e-learning institution with a focus on business-to-business education.

The analysis of academic administration and organizational model in the two companies has an overall implication that digital distance universities need academic administration and organization that is ‘flexible’ and capable of taking advantage of ‘uniqueness of digital distance universities’.

A few specific implications for organizational aspects of digital distance universities are:

1. Digital distance universities need a completely new model for human resource management to secure enough staff in the areas of instructional content development, course management, marketing, and general management.
2. Strategic outsourcing in some parts of the service may be necessary and efficient.
3. Securing and managing the technology base including software, hardware, and network is an essential prerequisite.
4. Application of organizational elements of e-businesses may be necessary. Also necessary for quality control of educational service are in-house development and organization-wide sharing of models for work responsibility and business process model (especially for content development).

Analysis of Academic Administration and Organization of International e-Universities

We analyze models for academic administration and organization in four international digital distance universities: University of Phoenix Online, Penn State World Campus, University of Maryland University College, and University of Southern Queensland. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is in Australia and the others are in the US. The analysis uses a framework adapted from the five-item quality control standards for digital distance universities proposed by the National Education Association. The framework focuses on six areas: 1) pedagogical objectives and mission, 2) academic organization, 3) instruction-learning support, 4) student aid, 5) instruction evaluation, and 6) faculty and support staff. The analysis leads to the following conclusions.

First, each and every one of the four digital distance universities we analyze continually operates on an organizational platform and culture of its own appropriate for distance education, whether it is an annex institution of an existing university or an independent institution. Distance education should not be viewed as a supplementary function of an existing university. Introducing a new set of departments, equipment, staff, rules and regulations is necessary to raise the level of efficiency and effectiveness.

Second, the quality of education provided by the online universities is based on their exclusive know-how and technological advantage. The University of Maryland University College has a WebTycho system, and the system and technology of the USQ is based on the intelligent flexible learning model developed in conjunction with the NextEd. Their technological advantage is maintained by continual update and security.

Third, the universities use aggressive efforts to recruit students such as USQNet, discounts on payments in whole, lottery events for free courses, etc. Their marketing efforts are diversified to target students for both degree programs and non-degree programs such as certificate programs, credit programs, and tailored programs.

Fourth, the universities provide one-stop student support service online that includes academic administration, digital library, technical support, training for online learning aptitude, and services for special students. For example, the University of Phoenix has ‘Onestop’ student service, digital library, Academic Counselor, and 24-hour technical support.

Fifth, development and management of a unique and educational instruction-support model consistent with the university-wide pedagogical objectives and mission, curriculum, and evaluation system show a possibility in instructional quality control. For example, USQ uses a ‘Unit-Team’ model for standardization of content development and quality control. As a related example, universities specify a certain amount of study hours appropriate per credit hour as a guideline. The University of Phoenix officially suggests 15-20 hours of work per week for a 3-credit course.
Sixth, quality control in successful digital distance universities is made possible by support organizations linked to front-end organizations. USQ operates committees for marketing, system management, and instructional management, as well as a vice presidential committee. The Distance Education Center at USQ takes the responsibility of supporting online education. The University of Maryland University College uses LeADS in conjunction with other IT departments as a support center for distance education for quality control.

Seventh, securing necessary resources is crucial for quality control and organized growth in digital distance universities. The universities reviewed in our analysis use abundant resources and a well-designed organization to provide a wide range of programs in a variety of disciplines to students all over the world.

Eighth, digital distance universities need programs to help faculty and students develop expertise in online instruction learning. For example, the Penn State University World Campus has built an online faculty community to promote faculty development through online training, seminars, and newsletters, and opened a free online course called ‘World Campus 101’ for students.

Ninth, digital distance education demonstrates the absolute need for partnership. For example, the University of Phoenix maintains a close partnership with Microsoft Corporation in system development, and the development of the e-book is currently under way. USQ is a shareholder of NextEd, and takes responsibility in its technical support and cooperates with INDELT A for online training.

Tenth, variety is another theme in digital distance education. Digital distance universities are creating their own unique and differentiated strategies while they share many common characteristics. Digital distance universities employ their own strategies and policies regarding academic term systems, tuition level, admission, student evaluation, curriculum, student aid, central administrative organization, and online support staff. These differences appear to stem from the universities’ founding mission commitments. For example, the University of Phoenix is a private for-profit corporation. USQ is a non-profit organization on the surface but in effect it has organization that pursues profits and invests in independent for-profit companies. The Penn State World Campus is a non-profit organization and the University of Maryland UC is a for-profit organization, while both are affiliated with existing universities. (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001).

Analysis of Academic Administration and Organization of Korea’s Domestic e-Universities

We apply the same framework to all of the 15 Korea’s domestic digital distance universities currently under operation. The analysis leads to the following conclusions.

First, most digital distance universities follow existing offline universities in rules regarding academic term systems and credit composition. This practice hardly takes into account the uniqueness of digital distance universities running in a cyber environment that is distinct from the existing traditional offline learning environment, while it may maintain a level of compatibility with offline universities for purposes such as credit exchange.

Second, work hours needed to finish a session in distance education are harder to determine than in face-to-face instruction that is given in a predetermined length of time. This comes with the flexibility that students can have about their control of the session progress.

Third, according to studies so far, development and choice of instruction-learning models in most digital distance universities are left to instructors or simply follow the models of traditional offline universities. It is not clear that digital distance universities have strategies for support and quality control of the instructional models that are left to instructors to develop or choose. The distance education models suggested in a few digital distance universities are too general or too theoretical to be used directly in distance education.

Fourth, students in digital distance universities can interact with the instructor as needed, but the channels are mostly asynchronous as in emails and electronic b-boards. Asynchronous interactions facilitate certain aspects of opinion exchange but limit immediate feedback. The class size limit in most digital distance universities is 100 to 200, which limits the access to timely response from the instructor. While there may be many teaching assistants to an instructor, there are issues that need to be addressed by the instructor.

Fifth, excellence in the area of expertise is generally the most important criterion in faculty recruiting of digital distance universities, as in traditional offline universities. This tendency, while not without merits, downplays the importance of knowledge about the cyber environment in which instruction and academic administration is performed.
Sixth, most digital distance universities operate support systems for content design, facility management, computing system management, public relations and marketing, and teaching assistants. What most lack is a support system to help students manage the learning process. Academic advisors, academic counselors and distance education advisors found commonly in international digital distance universities are examples of such a support system to help students who are on their own in the distance education environment and suffer from difficulties managing the learning process.

Seventh, most digital distance universities rely on tuition revenues for their financial needs. Digital distance universities need diverse sources of financial resources to meet the demand for large investments, especially at the early stage.

A Proposal of Academic Administration and Organization Model for Digital Distance Universities

A proposal of academic administration and organizational model for digital distance universities is made based on the above literature review, survey of expert opinions, benchmark analysis of distance education enterprises, and analysis of academic administration and organization of international and domestic digital distance universities.

We propose an academic administration and organization model for successful educational service. This model shows that digital distance universities should be equipped with detailed services on both the faculty and staff sides of the academic administration, instruction-learning support, student aid, and educational evaluation, and that these services also need support in the form of organization. The model also emphasizes flexibility and dynamism that connects services and organizations and enables timely provision of services and top-level receptiveness.

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