

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

Edited by Susan D'Antoni

USQOnline, Australia

James C. Taylor

An evolution of an existing institution



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



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for Educational Planning

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List of abbreviations

GOOD	Generic Online Offline Delivery
USQ	University of Southern Queensland

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Developments since 2003

1. USQOnline and its context

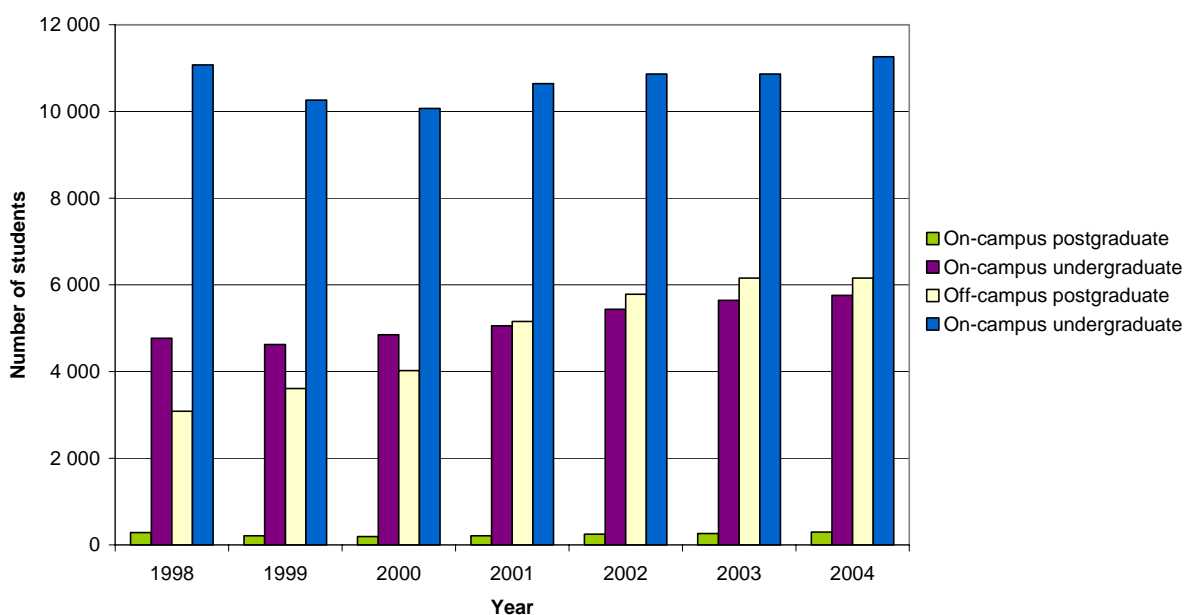
The University of Southern Queensland's (USQ's) continuing strategic commitment to distance education and online learning is reflected in enrolment patterns. Over the past 10 years, on-campus enrolments have grown steadily from 4,542 to 6,050, while off-campus enrolments have grown from 11,506 to 17,421. For the past 5 years, off-campus enrolments have constituted approximately 75 per cent of USQ students (Figure 1). During the same period, the proportion of international students at USQ has grown significantly, to almost 29 per cent in 2004, with 763 students currently studying on campus in Toowoomba, and 5,421 students studying offshore. Of these, 1,397 individual students were recruited directly. The remainder were recruited through agreements with international agents, including a further 610 students (predominantly postgraduate) studying at other centres in Australia, primarily in Sydney.

These 2004 figures include 6,794 international students (Table 1), including 4,634 studying offshore in approximately 118 countries.

2. Organization and current programmes

The organizational structure associated with the USQOnline initiative is essentially the same, but USQ is currently reviewing the role of the Online Teaching Management Committee, which is likely to be subsumed by a new structure, the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee, which will focus on all USQ modes of delivery: on-campus, off-campus via the

Figure 1 USQ student enrolment by mode and type of programme (1998-2004)



Source: USQ, 2004.

Table 1 USQ's international offshore students in 2004

Region/Country	2004 enrolments
Malaysia	1,605
Singapore	1,225
India	562
China	421
Hong Kong	396
Taiwan	259
Fiji	202
South Africa	195
Bangladesh	193
United Arab Emirates	172
Canada	142
Germany	124
Total (including 106 other countries)	6,794

Source: USQ, 2004.

distributed learning centres, and online. This initiative reflects that online delivery is now part of the mainstream delivery of USQ programmes, which increasingly entail hybrid combinations of the modes of delivery.

The only other relevant development is a shift in the role of the Vice-President (Global Learning Services), which has been expanded to include the management of the faculties, and is now entitled Vice-President (Academic and Global Learning). This expanded executive role still includes oversight of USQ's e-University Project.

Since the launch of USQOnline in 1999, the number of programmes and courses that are available totally online has remained relatively static, while the number of students studying via this conduit has grown steadily (Table 2). At the same time, practically all USQ courses now have an online component, and all USQ students have access to a range of online systems, including USQConnect, USQAssist, online enrolment and the USQ Library, which has an extensive online collection.

3. Administrative issues

Late in 2003, the name of the Distance Education Centre was changed to the Distance and e-Learning Centre to reflect the change in operations of the centre, which has continued to evolve with the introduction of USQOnline in 1999, and the move towards hybrid modes of delivery in 2003. While USQ experimented with mixed-mode delivery in the early 1990s, the Vice Chancellor's Committee endorsed a more concerted effort on hybrid modes of delivery at its strategic planning retreat in 2003. Unlike most cost centres at USQ, the Distance and e-learning Centre has actually experienced a slight decline in staff numbers, despite a significant growth in student numbers and course offerings. This decline has been partially

Table 2 Growth of USQOnline student enrolments

Year	Semester	Total enrolments
1999	Semester 2	289
	Semester 3	171
2000	Semester 1	1,766
	Semester 2	1,460
	Semester 3	1,087
2001	Semester 1	2,052
	Semester 2	2,113
	Semester 3	1,470
2002	Semester 1	2,588
	Semester 2	2,041
	Semester 3	1,688
2003	Semester 1	2,753
	Semester 2	2,640
	Semester 3	2,038
2004	Semester 1	3,161

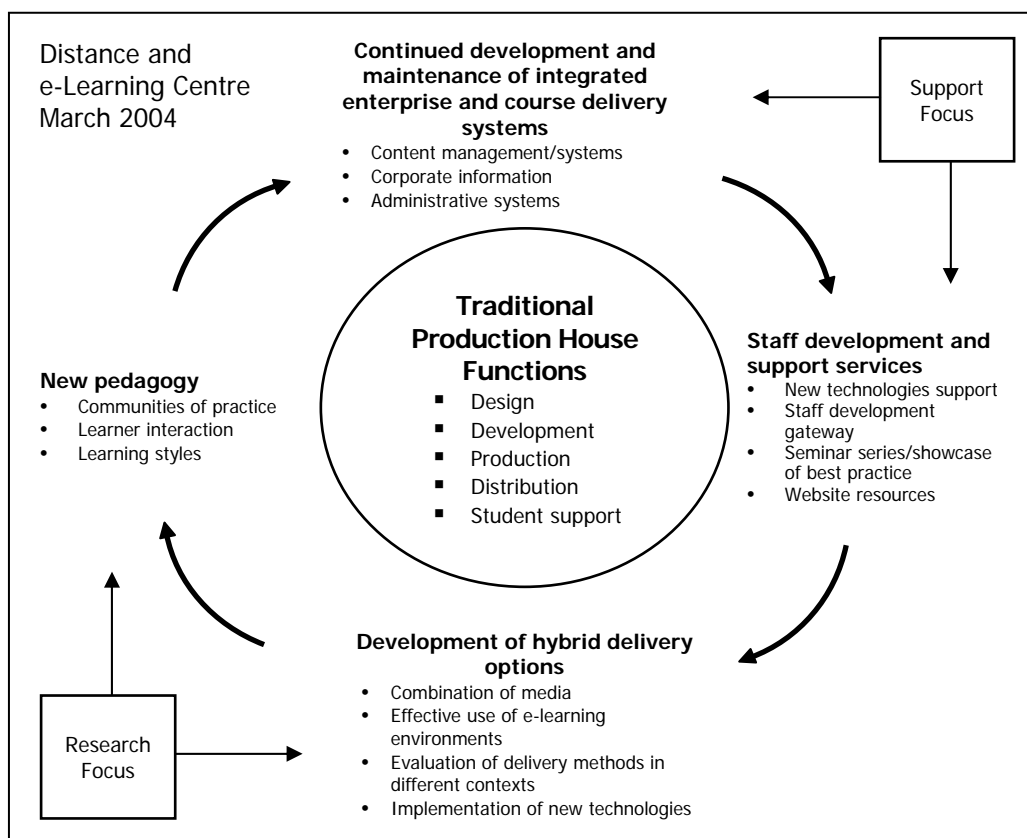
Source: USQ, 2004.

offset by increased efficiency in the use of online technology, including the web-based self-service initiatives underpinning USQAssist. The continuing implementation of the GOOD (Generic Online Offline Delivery) content management system will also ultimately lead to greater efficiency and greater flexibility in staffing to support the hybrid modes of delivery initiative. An overview of the current functions and associated activities of the Distance and e-Learning Centre is presented in Figure 2.

In parallel with USQOnline, the USQAssist initiative is deploying tracking and automation tools to manage the interaction between the university and its existing students. As USQ already has a need to provide global learning services to students enrolled in approximately ninety countries, the university has to face the challenge of being responsive to client needs twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week. When the project was initiated in late 1999, there were thirteen toll-free telephone numbers and numerous help-desk facilities offered by various sections of the university. Each of these services provided a valuable service and collected some useful information, but there was no systematic recording and processing of enquiries that would enable USQ to be more responsive to satisfying student needs. Using structured, intelligent databases, the knowledge generated by solving student problems and enquiries is being progressively stored and made available. As a result, wherever possible, students with equivalent or similar problems can have their enquiries dealt with immediately through the self-help, automated response capacity of the USQAssist system, thereby facilitating effective first point of contact resolution.

Table 3 highlights the effectiveness of the USQAssist system, showing the increasing use of self-service, increased use of the web to submit questions ('Ask a Question' tab at

Figure 2 Overview of Distance and e-Learning Centre functions



Source: USQ, 2004.

USQAssist) and the reduced number of e-mails received (e-mail inboxes captured by the system for processing).

At the time of writing considerable increase in the use of USQAssist was anticipated during 2004 and beyond, based on a comparison of figures from February 2003 and February 2004, as shown in Table 4.

Table 3 Overview of USQAssist usage statistics (2001-2003)

Year	Answers viewed	Sessions (visitors)	Hits	Web questions	Email questions
2001 (9 months)	1,583	1,655	6,165	15	50,475
2002	47,576	48,983	172,174	2,162	94,141
2003	133,973	209,926	509,486	7,537	80,558
Comparison (percentage)	+36	+23	+34	+29	-14

Source: USQ, 2004.

Table 4 Comparison of USQAssist usage statistics (Feb 2003–Feb 2004)

	Answers viewed	Sessions (visitors)	Hits	Web questions	Email questions
Feb 2003	7,870	8,144	30,629	397	6,407
Feb 2004	27,495	42,959	90,090	891	6,932
Comparison (percentage)	+71	+81	+66	+55	+7

Source: USQ, 2004.

4. Lessons learned

While online delivery is now part of the mainstream operations of USQ, the lessons learned from the USQOnline initiative, as outlined in the original case study, are still very much relevant.