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ISSN: 1575-2275

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Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
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Digithum, núm. 9, maig, 2007

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Barcelona, Espanya

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Dossier: "The virtual environment student"

The online student as a driving force in the transformation of the Polish Virtual University

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Submission date: January 2007

Published in: May 2007

RECOMMENDED CITATION

DZIUBIŃSKA, Marta; OPOKA, Joanna (2007). "The online student as a driving force in the transformation of the Polish Virtual University". In: Federico BORGES (coord.). "The virtual environment student" [online dossier]. *Digitum*. Iss. 9. UOC. [Date of citation: dd/mm/yy].
<http://www.uoc.edu/digithum/9/dt/eng/dziubinska_opoka.pdf>
ISSN 1575-2275

Abstract

In an effort to develop a meaningful and sustainable study programme, the Polish Virtual University (PVU) has undergone a dramatic transition from the formula of a traditional university adapted for the purpose of online learning and teaching to a fully integrated, student-centred modern higher education institution functioning in the environment of e-learning. The independence of students as clients and addressees of the virtual university offer has been nurtured in the course of the PVU's transition, and the practice of online tutoring has improved significantly. The student and tutor support system has been developed and become a critical component of the PVU system. This article gives an overview of the actions initiated at the PVU which helped to create an atmosphere of fearless learning and support students in their pursuit of knowledge expansion and upgrading practical skills. It also discusses the importance of taking into consideration the whole scope of overlapping commitments that online students have to cope with.

Keywords

teaching and learning, online student profile, student performance, virtual university transition, tutor training, course planning

Resum

La Universitat Virtual Polonesa (PUW) ha sofert una transició dramàtica perquè s'ha esforçat per desenvolupar un programa d'estudis important i viable; ha passat d'aplicar una fórmula d'una universitat tradicional adaptada per a l'aprenentatge i la docència en línia a una institució d'ensenyament superior moderna, plenament integrada, centrada en els estudiants i que funciona en l'entorn de l'aprenentatge virtual. La idea diferenciadora dels estudiants com a clients i destinataris de l'oferta



universitària virtual s'ha anat perfilant durant la transició de la PUW, i la pràctica de les tutories en línia ha millorat considerablement. S'ha desenvolupat el sistema de suport de l'estudiant i del consultor i ha esdevingut una part essencial del sistema de la PUW. Aquest article proporciona una visió general de les accions que s'han endegat a la PUW, les quals han ajudat a crear una atmosfera d'aprenentatge il·limitat i han ajudat els estudiants en la seva recerca d'ampliació del coneixement i millora de les habilitats pràctiques. També parla de la importància de tenir en compte l'abast sencer dels compromisos parcials que han d'afrontar els estudiants en línia.

Paraules clau

estudiant, estudiant d'entorns virtuals, estudiant d'Humanitats, estudiant de Filologia, estudiant de llengua estrangera, perfil de l'estudiant virtual

1. PVU online students

An average student who decides to take the chance and enter Polish Virtual University, which is the biggest e-learning institution in Poland, usually has some experience and opinions of the system of higher education as it is constructed in Poland. PVU students are mostly professionally active, middle class people at the age of 30. They are both men and women with certain family obligations, some of them stay abroad temporarily or permanently, but all are people with a strong motivation to upgrade their professional skills and acquire state-of-the-art knowledge in the fields in which they have already had a substantial portion of informal training.

Most of them have also experienced at least one failure in the system of traditional university education, as they entered university straight after graduating from secondary school, which is a typical practice for young people in Poland. They are encouraged by the system (and usually their parents) not to waste time and continue their education in one of quite a few renowned Polish universities or numerous private higher education institutions to gain a proper full educational 'package' and develop an advantage before entering the difficult Polish labour market. The greatest problem appears to be the fact that the traditional Polish education system remains stiff, unreformed and does not accept change easily. The very term 'academia' or 'university' in Poland implies a rigid, non-flexible attitude and is still very much related to the idea of tradition and historical background frequently associated with reluctance towards change and conviction of one's infallibility and inner value supported by traditional experience. A typical Polish university faces its past rather than the future in respect to both administrative actions and formal organisational issues as well as methodology and teaching styles.

2. Students' expectations

Such an attitude does not allow many students' expectations to be approached in an effective way. More and more of them strive for practical, up-to-date knowledge that is usable and testable in

their professional life rather than the formal theory-based training widely offered. They also expect the school to be liberal enough to tolerate the fact that education is not the only sphere in which students function—some of them start their careers early and are professionally active, some have to care for family, some shift interests etc. As a result, they expect education and educators who are flexible and able to modify the offer to meet students' needs. The problem is that the very words 'offer' and 'client' raise the hairs on the backs of the necks of many university teachers and trigger repulsion—they concentrate on core values and the university mission to transfer knowledge from masters to the minor and the promotion of scientific development.

No doubt some of the students get easily frustrated and give up further education in favour of taking up a regular job. If they succeed, after a considerable amount of time, they find out that navigating the career path would be easier if they had a formal validation of their competences. At this point they usually go back to the idea of re-entering the world of formal education. Those of them who are most conscious of their abilities and at the same time acquainted with the modern computer and information technology come to the Polish Virtual University. Some others remain faithful to the idea (and practice) of traditional university.

3. PVU transformation promoted by students

The Polish Virtual University has emerged as an educational organisation having to carry no burden of tradition and seemingly freed from all the inhibitions and hindrances inevitable for academia. The PVU's ambition was to become a competitive modern educational institution with its activity strongly student-centred which involves readiness to change and flexibility in dealing with organisational and administrative issues. We were convinced that the main concern should be students' educational needs, satisfying which was defined as our mission. However, the PVU had to follow the legal and formal requirements—it was established in 2002 as a virtual university modelling its system of



educational activity on traditional patterns. To secure and partly to legitimise our position in the educational world, we decided to start our cooperation with renowned professors and university teachers whose competences were supposed to be transferred into virtual educational environment. We were supposed to follow gurus if we wanted to survive among other higher education institutions. In practice, the professor was treated like the pivot and justification of our existence. His or her voice became dominant and most of their suggestions and proposed solutions were put into practice and accepted. Such a situation had immediate consequences in respect to:

1. Course material design which was overwhelmed with theory—most of the course materials were simply textbooks implemented on LMS with very few practical applications of theory described, with no case-studies, few tasks, projects and assignments promoting interaction or communication online.
2. Online tutoring—the tutor remained as the centre of attention of the system. Students remained its object and were supposed to follow instructions which were limited to commands to acquire facts, recite what had been learned. Tutors displayed quite a reluctant attitude towards students and their expectations, sometimes their behaviour was discouraging or even hostile. They showed little acceptance of the PVU instructors' opinion and advice. This resulted in conflicting interests—there was no real exchange or dialogue—either between students and tutors, or instructional designers and tutors.

As a result, we observed a large drop-out of students. 60% of the students recruited in the first cohort resigned after the first semester of studies. There emerged an immediate need to modify the system. Sufficiently anxious, the PVU authorities decided to open up for the students' voice, which was previously, if listened to, eventually not heard—there have always been several channels to be used by students to express their opinions, but we did not expect the feedback would be so valuable. Students could use discussion groups and were invited to send mails or fill in online surveys, but in the course of everyday activity their opinions were given little consideration or were simply ignored. When we turned to students' messages, we learned that they predominantly complained about the lack of real contact and impossibility of cooperating with the tutor whom they expected to become their guide, helper and a partner rather than a supervisor and controller. Students put the issue of inefficient student-tutor cooperation above the quality of e-books, but they also criticised the inflexible course schedule and pace of work on individual courses which were all designed in a similar way—no matter what the subject was, there were two 3-week study periods each followed by a week of break during which a 6-module course had to be completed.

Some of the e-mails we received from students proved the level of desperation was high as the arguments were repeated:

"I am overwhelmed with the stock of new information I am supposed to process—assignments, chat meetings and discussion groups and projects are impossible to be done in one week! Can't you see there is too much work and we are not able to cope with the subsequent modules of the three courses at one time?! It is impossible to stretch time and manage all family and work duties with learning commitments... The PVU seemed to be a perfect option for a family man like me at first, but it turns out that managing all my obligations and earning at least a satisfactory grade for the work I do on the course is undoable. It makes me feel frustrated and angry! It is not what I pay for. You should organise the courses in a more reasonable way otherwise I (and many of my fellow students) will leave your university..."

It appeared that our students, in having to mix work and family commitments and online learning often experienced strong feelings of guilt. This resulted from a burden of responsibilities and time pressure—altogether bringing about strong negative emotions and making students feel isolated, insecure, often anxious, which naturally led to frustration.

However, fortunately most of the letters usually ended with a question or a request:

"'Please tell me what to do' or 'Do you think there is anything you could do to help students in this situation?'"

Such final remarks indicated that the students' trust and hope for the situation to be improved by the decision makers had not vanished totally! Obviously we had to react quickly. We decided to assign more time for the courses which were reported as most demanding and provided extra learning resources which could be used by less brilliant students in need of refreshing basic knowledge. Students perceived it as a clear signal that our objective was to satisfy their needs and that the PVU is flexible enough on the instructional level and that we care.

In the next stage of transformation, we decided to introduce changes to the whole of the system and first of all build up our instructional competences and then pass them on to our tutors. We risked recruiting tutors from different environments—no longer only academia. We initiated cooperation with young practitioners, university graduates, even if they had little teaching experience, and besides this we discerned enthusiasts who found us by themselves having been interested in the idea of e-learning itself. All these people were obliged to participate in training for online tutors. They participated in live and online courses during which they learned about computer technology and its application in education, the methodology of e-learning, didactics and they



acquired both theoretical and practical knowledge of what the requirements, advantages and threats are for online students. Tutors experienced online learning, developed a better understanding of online education perceived from the student's perspective and were given a chance to discover for themselves what it takes to commit professional life, family duties and participation on an online course. This phase was a cornerstone in PVU activity. Having identified the critical elements of a student's experience, tutors are now more open to introducing modifications to the courses conducted—they allow access to archive materials, they negotiate and shift assignment deadlines more flexibly, they come up with a wider pool of learning resources and, above all, they are able to communicate with students and react creatively and independently when faced with troubles or students' demands or complaints.

Gradually, a team of trained, enthusiastic, young tutors has been created and their effort has been the force which has reversed the trend. The PVU is successively gaining the image of a student-friendly, open, modern, flexible and innovative educational institution, which well serves the needs of modern students coming from the class of working people in need of advancing or reformulating their formal education. This image is spread naturally by our students and by participants on open courses, and results in the increasing numbers of new recruits.

Over recent years, the Polish Virtual University has tripled the number of students recruited twice a year in October and March. Most of them quote the flexibility, openness, and open access to resources and tutors as the key factors influencing their choice of educational path. Having been encouraged by the success of the modification of the tutor training system, we have initiated other actions aimed at better educational process organisation and fulfilment of students' expectations. These actions involve:

1. Investing in the creation of a team of highly skilled e-educators and clever, competent and enthusiastic instructors who, on the one hand, are eager to constantly upgrade their skills and expand knowledge of e-learning and, on the other, are cooperating with and supporting tutors.
2. Promoting independent student learning—students are asked and taught to choose and decide about what and how to learn and how to make use of all the services provided by the system.
3. Change of the course material format—practicality, accuracy, usability are the most important criteria of the quality of the material. Extravagant graphic design of the course materials and spectacular multimedia was replaced by up-to-date and verified educational modern online scripts which serve as concise and usable textbooks. The fact that students use printed versions of course scripts was accepted and all PDF files are easily printable so students are no longer limited to using electronically published materials only. It required the

PVU editorial team to modify the e-book design and now they may be easily used as paper books as well. Multimedia are limited to self-check quizzes, tests, activities and short Flash presentations promoting self-evaluation skills in students.

4. Conclusions

The conclusion we arrived at after almost 5 years of PVU activity is simple, albeit exactly the opposite to what we (instructional designers, tutors, trainers) were taught during our university years—modern education is a product designed to meet students' needs and these are students who should formulate opinions and evaluate university offer. Anyone who is not able to accept this fact will drop out and fail. Students may function as "beta" testers for online courses and should be constantly actively used to shape them.

Careful course planning, space left for alterations and open, effective communication procedures help create a cooperative learning environment with a tutor who is supportive enough and student-friendly, together with easily accessible course resources. PVU students have been effectively encouraged to communicate and speak up to the institution by, among others, effective and immediate reaction to the requests and feedback we receive. PVU instructional designers have learned the lesson themselves—if an online student is failing, it is important to look first at the learning and teaching environment, not the student themselves.

PVU students are viewed as a group of individuals encouraged to present their own expectations, potential and background, not a group of receivers of instruction and uniform knowledge. Unification kills individuality, so there is no place for it in the PVU and the educational process is in no aspect restricted—on the contrary, it is the process in which both tutors and students act on equal rights and both at the same time gain from each other. What seems most important is the fact that students feel more self-motivated and feel secure enough to come out, formulate opinions, request, demand and judge rather than accept being treated as objects of education as happens in many traditional systems.

Unlike most traditional universities, the PVU as an e-learning educational institution has an ambition to nurture students' independence as learners who will be able to make sense of the new educational situation. They are encouraged to accept the role of initiator and architect of the education system in which they function. The open online educational environment offers huge potential for students' self-directed learning and working, but still certain doubts persist. The e-learning arrangements that we offer at the PVU may prove to be too demanding for students who perform poorly or lack motivation. The same arguments apply to some teachers who are still not always eager to redefine their professional identity. All these challenges and drawbacks create



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space for improvement and influence the future development plans of the Polish Virtual University.

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