

Growing an E-Learning Programme for Rural Adults: A Case Study

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Abstract:

This paper describes an e-learning third level diploma and degree course program delivered all over Ireland during 1996-2006 to rurally remote adults wishing to achieve a higher education qualification and to contribute to the development of their rural areas. The paper explores distance learning, e-learning, and lifelong learning outlining;

- How did this programme emerge?
- How was it designed, managed, presented and assessed?
- Who are the learners?
- What learning media are used?
- What is the method?
- What is the impact?, and
- What are the lessons learned?

The paper presents a brief case study of the bachelor in science in rural development degree (BSc) arising from consultations with 20 participants of the course addressing;

- Their experience of e-learning.
- The contribution of this e-learning course to their transformation and progression.
- The impact of lifelong learning, through this e-learning course to their hope for the future.

The findings seeks to illustrate the contribution of e-learning to lifelong learning as a model of educating “into” and “in” community, rather than educating “out of” community.

Introduction

This paper seeks to present a case study of the NUI BSc Degree in Rural Development by Distance Learning¹ as a model of blended learning to rurally remote adults seeking a higher education that will enhance the quality of their life. The paper describes the evolution, application and impact of the programme. The paper emphasises the importance of blended learning and the advantage of e-learning to educate “into” the local community rather than “out of” it. The paper suggests five learning points arising.

- **How did this programme emerge ?**

The NUI BSc Degree in Rural Development by Distance Learning was devised by the four NUI Colleges (NUI Dublin, NUI Cork, NUI Galway and NUI Maynooth), as a result of their involvement with the Rural Training Advisory Committee (RUTAC). RUTAC was established by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in response to the training and accreditation needs identified in the Creedon Report ‘Strategy for Rural Development Training’ (1993). Following a one year pilot course the four NUI constituent universities formed an academic steering committee drawn from the Department of Agri-Business, Extension and Rural Development, Faculty of Agriculture, NUID, Department of Food Business and Development, Centre for Co-operative Studies, NUIC, Department of Economics, NUIG, and the Department of Adult and Community Education, NUIM to supervise and develop the programme.

Five cohorts of diploma students (one cohort every two years) have graduated from the Diploma level course. In 2004 the BSc degree was launched and the first cohort is graduating in 2006.

- **How is the course designed, managed, presented and assessed ?**

The NUI BSc Degree in Rural Development by Distance Learning is the first mature student access qualification that recognises and extends the professional qualification pathway for adults active in the development of rural areas. Further, this Degree programme is the first third level NUI qualification to extensively use information technology in rural development distance learning. This unique programme is developing a virtual campus among the four constituent universities to provide participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to initiate and manage local rural development.

The Diploma/BSc in Rural Development by Distance Learning is a flexible-time distance learning programme. The programme is designed to develop in students the full range of knowledge and skills that constitute rural development. The aims of the course are as follows:

¹ See http://adulthoodeducation.nuim.ie/docs/CUC3_Degree_BSc_Rural_Dev_06.pdf and <http://www.v-learn.ie/>

- To introduce participants to the broad theoretical knowledge base in the field of rural development so as to assist them in critically appraising the multiplicity of strategies and approaches in the field.
- To educate participants in the theory and practice of rural development management.
- To introduce participants to the range of strategies that address social, economic and personal/group strategies for rural areas.
- To create a third level educational pathway for rural development activists for their personal and professional qualification.
- To use modern education technologies to support learning from a distance into a community.
- To enable a mature student to qualify with a diploma after two years and to continue to earn a degree with a minimum of a further two years of flexible study time.

• **Who are the learners ?**

The course is designed, based on the Creedon Report (Strategy for Rural Development Training, 1993) for adults living in rural areas with some level of experience of rural development, seeking to build their knowledge capacity of rural development, and intending to make an ongoing contribution to rural development. The course is specifically targeted at adults who, in mainstream higher education terms, may be excluded from participation and higher education achievement. The design and methodology specifically seeks to educate “into” rather than “out of” remoter areas.

Students may register with any of the four participating colleges; ideally the college in closest proximity to the student’s home. Foundation work is delivered to familiarise students with a blended-learning approach to distance learning. An introductory module on the use of information technology (IT) is organised for successful applicants to improve their IT skills and student study groups are set up in each area.

The course content includes:

- Introduction to socio-economic aspects of rural development
 - Socio-economic community/area resource audits, rural development organisation/structure
 - Designing and managing an area development plan
 - Business planning, marketing and stimulating rural enterprise such as tourism and SMEs(Small & Medium Sized Enterprises).
 - Interpersonal communications, leadership and group-work skills
 - Financial management and economic management.
 - Policy development and management
 - Research skills
 - Inter-organisational partnerships and the role of support agencies
 - Social exclusion and gender equality issues in rural development
- Learning is presented in five and ten credit learning modules.

• **What learning media are used ?**

The course is delivered using a combination of web and text based modules, tutorials, lecture presentations, inter-university seminars and innovative blended learning methods. One of the benefits of this approach is that the need to travel to central locations for face-to-face work is minimised. Where face-to-face delivery is scheduled it will not exceed the equivalent of two full days per month after which students will study at home or in small local study groups. A local facilitator is available where feasible to work with local study groups.

• **What is the method ?**

The Diploma/BSc in Rural Development by Distance Learning is delivered on a modular system through a combination of home-based distance learning manuals, regional tutorial workshops and integrated assignment projects. The programme comprises of three levels:

Level One, offered over two years on a part-time basis leading to the Diploma qualification.

Level's Two & Three, each offered in one academic year, i.e. on a full-time equivalent basis. Levels Two & Three combined lead to a Degree (Bsc) level qualification

In general students invest 600 hours yearly in study broadly distributed as follows:

- 200 Hours - Tutorial Workshops
- 300 Hours - Home-based Distance Learning
- 100 Hours - Integrated Fieldwork Project (Diploma), minor-thesis (degree)

A variety of mechanisms are used to assess each participants performance including continuous assessment based on module assignments, workshop participation, examinations, integrated fieldwork project / minor thesis completion and attendance. Participants are assessed by the college with which they register.

From an academic perspective the course material is regularly updated and supplemented with expert input lectures and resource materials posted on the virtual learning environment (VLE)². Standards are supervised by the academic committee, the faculties, examination boards, the external examiner and the NUI standards system. The academic committee has achieved standardisation of fees and of marks/standards across the universities. This is crucial to the joint delivery of the programme.

The academic board constantly seeks to strengthen collaboration between the institutions for the most effective model of blended distance learning delivery. The strengthening of collaboration has resulted in excellent results, progression from a diploma to a degree qualification, the development of a virtual center of excellence in rural development, collaborative research, the preparation for a masters level progression route and detailed evaluation of the collaborative process of working together (2006). This process will present a valuable model of higher education collaboration for the sustained development of innovative higher education delivery into the early 21st century.

² This course uses the BlackBoard VLE

- **What is the impact ?**

The following are some of the impacts:

- The Diploma/BSc in Rural Development by Distance Learning has received a grant from the Department of Agriculture to support its administration and co-ordination since its inception. This grant was increased significantly in 2006. Over the period of the programme students received financial support from area based rural development support agencies in their respective areas.
- The numbers of students graduating yearly is presented in Table 1. Similar numbers will graduate in 2006 from the Diploma along with 56 from the Degree course.

Table One: Students by University of Registration

University	1998	2000	2002	2004	Total
NUID	16	26	16	19	77
NUIC	18	18	13	17	66
NUIG	17	10	15	17	59
NUIM	24	23	16	17	80
Total	75	77	60	70	282

- In 2001 the Board secured a grant under the EU Research Stimulus Fund to research and develop a full e-learning degree programme in rural development. This coincided with the four universities purchasing licenses for BlackBoard (BB) e-learning environment.
- All Diploma/BSc in Rural Development by Distance Learning modules (28) are converted into HTML, burned onto CDs and uploaded on to BlackBoard VLE. The material includes text, sound and video. Using the BlackBoard platform students may access course material, interact with course tutors and other students using email and chat rooms and submit assignments. Lectures are delivered to students on-line using a programme called Impactia which allows Power Point presentations including text, sound and videos to be compressed and accessed by rural students using 56K modems. Material is also available on CD as a back up to virtual systems.
- While research on the technical and academic design of the curriculum is conducted on an on-going basis, a major student research project was also undertaken in the programme. In 2004 Diploma level students administered over 1249 questionnaires in the 26 counties covering a range of rural issues including household, transport, social capital, environment, farm and rural enterprise issues. The data was compiled and published in “Rural Living: An Analysis of 1249 Rural Households” (National University of Ireland, 2006. See <http://www.v-learn.ie/Rural%20Living%20Book%20final.pdf>)
- Students have organised and presented at a national conference on rural development (NUIM, April 2006), contributed to a journal titled “Rural Readings”, one student was supported through the summer research support programme of NUIM after a competitive process, three students are working on

publications and a number of regional seminars/conferences arising from thesis research are planned.

- Degree students are forming a network.

- **What are the lessons learned ?**

1. Blended learning does not replace classical learning methods, it augments it.

Any innovation is suspect in the beginning. While education is a change process many of us are resistant to change. There is always the fear that new methods will “replace” old methods. This applies very much in the technological sphere where obsolescence is often built into the application.

In this case study it is evident that e-learning has limitations. Blended learning encourages a mixing of methods in a student-centered way. In such a situation this case study demonstrates that blended learning augments classical higher educational learning methods.

2. Successful effective blended learning is primarily about the people, not about the technology.

In this case study the primacy of the student as the key to an effective learning experience became evident. A very strong bond developed in the course group between the students. Students who were more technologically competent assisted those less so. In the preparation of module projects students with experience and knowledge of particular sectors, e.g. tourism, shared with the others. In situations of serious personal and programme challenge the power of the groups(s) became evident.

3. The synergy and challenges in inter-institutional collaboration

The collaboration of the four constituent NUI universities in this programme is a vital ingredient. The collaboration in this specialised area enabled the highest expertise to collaborate. The practical benefits were more effective use of resources and increased synergy. As evidenced in the collaborative research and funding practical benefits are gained. This will increase with the greater emphasis now being placed on inter-institutional collaboration.

However it is important to point out that inter-institutional collaboration does not happen without significant investment of time and a generosity of spirit. We assume we know how to collaborate. However real collaboration requires a new way of working and an openness to change that has to be nurtured.

4. This form of learning is becoming increasingly accepted, needed, valued and opportune.

The situation, the needs and the expectations of the adult learner are changing. Socio-economic pressures on remote rural areas are driving a new openness to lifelong

learning. Yet cost and lifestyle challenges are making it more difficult to deliver education in a traditional way.

While there is far from widespread acceptance of blended learning as a model of mainstream learning there is a growing acceptance and growing demand. The impacts cited in this case study are a contribution to the mainstreaming process.

5. Dedicated application of adult education principles is critical for successful outcomes from blended learning programmes.

The experience described in this case study emphasises the centrality of adult education principles for effective learning. As later research work will show it is the application of adult education principles within the blended learning method that resulted in very low attrition of learners, no failures, and a high level of achievement among students in this programme.

Conclusion

The experience and the impact of this programme is significant. The cohorts of students who have completed the Diploma/BSc in Rural Development by Distance Learning have already made a significant contribution to the policy and application of rural development locally, regionally and nationally. The value of the blended learning method is now established as an option for adults wishing to return to higher education but limited through access constraints. The feasibility and importance of educating “into” rather than “out of” local communities is also established. However the programme now calls for significant research to validate the learning and to continue the development of effective blended learning within the higher education society.

Reference

Rural training and Advisory Committee RUTAC Report of the Review Group, 1993. Strategy for Rural Development Training. Dublin: Teagasc