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Characteristics of a supportive context for distributed learning: a case study of the implementation of a new degree

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

Doctor of Education

from

University of Wollongong

by

Geraldine Lefoe
M.Ed, B.Ed (Woll), Dip.T. (Prim) (WIE)

Faculty of Education

2003

Certification

I, Geraldine Lefoe, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Geraldine Lefoe

September 2003

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Abstract

In 2000, the University of Wollongong opened a new campus and two education access centres on the South Coast of New South Wales, Australia. The Faculty of Arts implemented a new degree, the Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment), as part of this initiative and the first year of implementation of this new degree is the focus of the study. The purpose of the study was to inform policy and practice at the University of Wollongong and to contribute to the small body of research in the area.

A qualitative case study approach was used to investigate the experience of teaching and learning in this context. The broad research question was: *What are the characteristics that could constitute guiding principles and strategies for a supportive context for distributed learning?* There were two sub-questions for the study: (1) What were the perceptions of the students, tutors, and subject coordinators in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) program of teaching and learning in a distributed learning context? (2) What organisational factors promoted or constrained teaching and learning for students and staff in a distributed learning context? Data was collected through observations, interviews, focus groups and subject surveys, and from records and documents of the institution. Data analysis involved determining the themes, which the researcher interpreted to determine the lessons learned and to make recommendations for policy and practice.

The study indicated that the distributed learning context is affected not only by the local implementation of teaching and learning, but also by the context of the wider university. The study revealed the need for an institutional response to the distributed learning context with documented procedures and policy developments to reflect the changing needs of the staff and students. In addition, the increased workload of academic staff implementing such initiatives needs to be acknowledged and rewarded through these changes. The study provides recommendations to improve the implementation process during subsequent years to ensure the sustainability of the initiative. In addition, a preliminary framework has been developed to identify the characteristics of a supportive context for distributed learning. The study may also have relevance to other institutions embarking on similar ventures, and areas for future research are suggested.

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