Global Universities in Distance Education (GUIDE)

Survey of Members: August, 2013

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Introduction

The Global Universities in Distance Education (GUIDE) association was founded in 2005 by Marconi University. Marconi University is a leading European institution headquartered in Rome, Italy. It has more than 14,000 students enrolled in graduate and post graduate programs primarily online. In the areas of undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs. The University has approximately 300 faculty members and it has served as the host and sponsor for the GUIDE association.

The purpose of the GUIDE association is to serve as a professional network of universities interested in sharing experiences and promoting online education. Specifically, the goal of GUIDE is to fundamentally enhance shared knowledge via networking and research which includes professional publications; and, an annual conference with peer reviewed proceedings. In particular, the annual conference has afforded an opportunity to network with online institutions and to present cases on “best practices” from member institutions.

The mission of GUIDE is to “promote the spreading of an equal supportive and sustainable knowledge thanks to the information and communication technologies CICT and working together to facilitate a global corporation model for distance education.” Since its inception, GUIDE has grown to more than 180 members throughout the world.

The purpose of this report is to provide the results of a survey conducted during the summer of 2013 of the GUIDE membership. Specifically, the survey was designed to develop a baseline of information on the status on online education among member institutions. The survey instrument itself was based on a similar survey of US based online institutions regularly conducted by the Sloan Consortium. The survey consisted of twenty seven questions and the intent was to both develop a baseline of relevant information on GUIDE members; and, to assess similarities and differences that might exist between primarily US (Sloan survey respondents) and non US (GUIDE survey respondents) online institutions.

The survey was circulated to GUIDE members electronically and there was a 25 percent response rate with 45 of 180 surveys completed and returned. Overall, the opportunity to complete a member’s survey was well-received and some commented on the value of developing member information that could be used to identify trends and compare results across time. Respondents noted that online learning was an important component of their institutional strategies and that online enrollments were growing quickly. Major barriers identified in implementing online education were considered to be cost and technology. In general, respondents suggested that the future of online learning would include continued growth and more migration to hand held devices.
Survey Responses

I) Strategy and Online Alignment

Most respondents (54%) strongly agree with the statement that online learning is a critical component of their overall institutional strategy; and an additional 33% agree with this statement. Only 10% disagree with the statement. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 Online as a Critical Component of Institutional Strategy
II) Enrollments

Online enrollments ranged from fewer than 100 to more than 250,000 students taking at least one course online.

Clearly, there is a wide divergence of size of institutional members. In addition, we see that online student growth is clearly increasing at member institutions. More than 90% of respondents noted that online enrollments were growing. Figure 2 provides an overview of the respondents who have confirmed enrollment growth.

Figure 2 Online Enrollments
III) Online/ Blended Courses

For the most part respondents noted that they offer both online and blended courses (46%); with blended offerings at 41.8% and only 13% only online. Some respondents noted that the blended component included limited residencies; and, in some cases a facilitated exam in person at the end of the course. In part, these face to face components were designed to meet government or regulatory requirements. The responses are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Mode of Delivery
IV) Student Enrollment Trends

Approximately 88% of respondents report that the numbers of students enrolling in their courses and programs are increasing; and, of these respondents 38% report increases greater than 7%. Fifty six percent report increases of less than 5%. The percentage increases for enrollments are included in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Increases in Online Students
V) Faculty

Most institutions use both full time and part-time (adjunct) faculty. Overall, there are approximately fifteen percent adjuncts or part time instructors for the programs of respondents. In addition, most respondents (74%) note that it takes the same number; or, indeed more faculty members to deliver online courses. Only 26% suggest that fewer faculty are required. In terms of faculty acceptance of online learning, 89% of respondents suggest that “the acceptance of online learning has increased.” Only 5% disagree with this statement (See Figure 5).

Figure 5 Faculty Acceptance of Online Learning
In terms of faculty, most respondents (81%) confirm that they have been able to secure competent and trained faculty (See Figure 6). Obviously, this is an important component of delivery with respect to online courses and the technology is changing very quickly. Securing and maintaining faculty is a key aspect of online education.

Figure 6 Ability to Secure Competent and Trained Faculty
VI) Government Acceptance
In terms of acceptance of online learning 34% strongly agree with the statement that “government acceptance has increased” and 39% agree with this statement. Fifteen percent have no opinion and 10% disagree with the statement.

Figure 7 Government Acceptance of Online Learning
VII) Employer Acceptance

In response to the statement “employer acceptance of online learning has increased” there were 55% of respondents who agree and 28% strongly agree. Of course, acceptance by employers is a very important concept as these employers are the “end users” of the online product.

Figure 8 Employer Acceptance of Online Learning
VIII) Learning Outcomes

The majority of respondents (68%) state that learning outcomes in their view “are comparable” with face-to-face learning (See Figure 9). In this area, some respondents noted a need for better measurement and factual results comparing the online versus on ground outcomes. Also, some respondents noted a need to develop trend line data.

Figure 9 Comparable Learning Outcomes
IX) Technology Barrier

Of course, technology is a critical component of online learning. In that regard, 32% of respondents strongly agree (8%) and agree (24%) with the statement that “technology is a barrier to your online learning efforts.” On the other hand, the survey confirms that 45% disagree with the statement and 18% strongly disagree.

Figure 10 Technology Barrier
X) Cost Barrier

Sixty percent of respondents either strongly agree (13%) or agree (47%) with the statement that “cost is a barrier to your online learning efforts.” Twenty eight percent disagree with the statement and 13% strongly disagree.

Figure 10 Cost Barrier
XI) Students

In terms of students, the survey asked if online discipline (the ability to study independently) has been an issue. In this question we see that there are many students who do need some form of added support. Fifty five percent either agree (42%) or strongly agree (13%) with the statement; whereas 26% disagree and 3% strongly disagree.

Figure 11 Online Discipline-Students

In addition, respondents were asked about student retention. Specifically, the statement in the survey was “student retention has been an issue with online courses.”
In response, 44% either agree (42%) or strongly agree (2%) with the statement; and 29% have no opinion and 24% disagreed (See Figure 12). Again, the data on student support and student retention do suggest that online learning requires a degree of self motivation which may be a challenge for some students.

Figure 12 Student Retention
XII) Future of Online

More than 90% of respondents agreed (34%) or strongly agreed (58%) with the statement that “online learning will increase in the future as a learning option” (See Figure 13). In addition, 85% suggest that online education will increasingly migrate to hand held devices.

Figure 13 Future of Online Learning

XIII) Biggest Challenges

Overall, the biggest challenges to online learning identified by respondents were related to cost and technology. Specifically, there are concerns that cost and technology may preclude access to education opportunities.
XIV) Open Ended Comments

The survey provided an opportunity to provide general comments. A number of respondents noted the value of a survey as a way to pull information together from all GUIDE members and suggested that a member survey be conducted on a regular basis to compare trends. In particular, respondents suggested that developing “best practice” cases would be a useful exercise for the Association.

In addition, there were comments raised about a growing digital divide with many parts of the world falling behind in terms of access to affordable, quality education options.

Finally, a number of respondents noted that online learning will be increasingly important for the foreseeable future and that is THE need of our times. One respondent noted that “Elearning is the way of the future. Embrace and you will survive. Ignore and you will perish academically.”

XV) Summary

There are a number of important findings in the survey. At the outset, it appears that online learning has become a strategically important element of the plans within many institutions. Overall, more than 87% agree with this statement. The GUIDE membership represents a very wide range of institutions in terms of size and, of course, geographic location. For the most part, respondents noted increases in online enrollments. Indeed, more than 38% identified that there were enrollment increases in excess of 7%. In terms of faculty, respondents do note that there has been increased acceptance of online learning. Of course, it is important to have the support and leadership of the faculty in delivering online education. For the most part, respondents identify that they are able to find competent and qualified faculty. In addition, it does appear that both the government and employer acceptance of online education are both increasing. This is an important finding as the outcome that we see that students are looking for is related to gaining academic credentials that assist in their employability. As we see in the survey, 68% of respondents confirm that in their view learning outcomes are comparable between on ground and online learning. Obviously, the connection between comparable learning outcomes and acceptance by governments and employers is a crucial component.

In terms of barriers to the development of online learning we see that there are cost and technology issues that are raised by many respondents as important. Indeed, there is a “digital divide” concern raised within the survey as we see a need to ensure that quality, affordable education is increasingly available across the globe. Also, the survey identifies the need to ensure that students are supported in respect to having the proper skills and “discipline” required to be a success in online learning. Fully 55% of respondents suggest that student ability to study independently is an issue. Not surprisingly, the concerns around the ability to study are linked to retention as we see that respondents (44%) are concerned about this issue.
Finally, most respondents do see that the future of online learning is very positive. Indeed, more than 90% agree that online learning options will continue to grow. One specific option identified within the survey was the opportunity for “virtual collaboration” or partnerships between online institutions. These opportunities could facilitate “exchanges”; joint research activities particularly on inter-jurisdictional issues; and student collaboration. Other options included workshops or conferences that used technology to address key questions or concerns on a more global basis. In addition, some respondents identified the opportunity to jointly award credentials accepted by the other institution.

In conclusion, the GUIDE survey was developed using the Sloan Consortium annual survey as a model. In that regard, there are many similarities in terms of the reported data and results. Clearly, GUIDE members note concerns about technology and cost limiting access to online learning. In addition, there is concern about student discipline in terms of the online education experience. These findings parallel those of the Sloan Consortium survey. In that regard, it may be useful to repeat a GUIDE member survey on a regular basis to track trend line data.