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Scaling up: how does it impact on pedagogy?

Liz Bennett, School of Education and Professional Development, University of Huddersfield, liz.bennett@hud.ac.uk

Background

In current economic climate higher education institutions are looking for ways of teaching and learning more efficiently. One solution appears to be larger cohorts studying online (Fildes 2010).

The Open University has been a leader in the field of online distance education for the last ten years (or more). However the Open University institutional context is entirely different from that of traditional place based education such as University of Huddersfield. The Open University students make their choice of course knowing that that they will need to operate in a distance medium and Open University staff have a set of roles, policies and practices to support distance delivery which have been accumulated over many years of operation.

Methodology and aims

An ethnographic study explore the impact that scaling up provision had on pedagogy and to compare how the institutional context impacts on online pedagogy (Coffey 1996).



lowest common denominator



one voice



Playing the room



Nanny state

Findings

The key issues which emerged were dubbed “**lowest common denominator**”, “**one voice**”, “**playing the room**” and “**nanny state**”. They consisted of some closely inter twined issues relating to the technological skills and confidence of both students and teachers and the need for a consistent approach when delivering large scale provision.

The analysis also indicated how the nature of the institution impacts on pedagogical processes in that students in place based institution have very different experiences and expectations of learning are different from those who sign up for a distance learning provider such as the Open University where a higher level of autonomous learning is necessary.

Conclusions

- scaling up is no panacea for the challenges of delivering more for less.
- scale introduces a new cost in the form of an additional layer of administration, tutor training and tutor support.
- Scale adds new sets of skills and ways of working; both pedagogic and administrative.

References

Coffey, A. (1999). *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London, Sage
Fildes. N. (2010, January 13). New learning curve scales the internet :Online education. The Times,