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Target Populations for Online Education

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For a variety of reasons, a rapidly increasing number of institutions of higher education have started to offer degrees and other educational programs fully online. Most institutions aim their online programs at mature part-time students. The assumption is that the increased convenience and flexibility that online programs offer and the fact that there is no need to attend traditional classroom settings make such programs particularly attractive to this group of students. However, there is relatively little evidence to bear out this assumption. This article describes a survey study addressing this issue. The survey was administered to students enrolled in a face-to-face MBA program, both as full-time and as part-time students. Interestingly, part-time students displayed a greater reluctance to enroll in online courses than full-time students. The survey did unearth some factors that had previously been overlooked and that seemed to more strongly influence students' willingness to enroll in online courses, namely previous knowledge of the topic, access to the instructor, perceived quality of the online courses, and hardware reliability.

The last few years have seen an astronomical increase in the number of degree and training programs offered online. In addition to the universities that offer their entire degree programs online, such as the University of Phoenix and Capella University, traditional universities are also increasing their online

course offerings and turning into "dual mode" institutions (Cookson, 2002; Carlson, 2003; Murphy, 2004). One example is the WebMBA program (http://www.webmbaonline.org/) that is offered fully online by a consortium of five traditional universities within the University System of Georgia.

This increase in course offerings appears to a large extent to have been driven by student demand. In 2002, 1.6 million students were enrolled in online courses in the United States (US), with the number having grown to 2.35 million in 2004 (Allen & Seaman, 2003; Allen & Seaman, 2005). One estimate suggests that by 2025, most college courses will be available in an online format (Dunn, 2000).

There are a number of reasons for the increasing popularity of online education. They include the higher cost of traditional face-to-face education, the need for increased academic productivity (Shea, Motiwalla, & Lewis, 2001; Hanley, 2002), the increasing number of adult and part-time learners, who often have to balance work and family commitments with their desire for further education and therefore can only attend traditional institutions of higher learning with great difficulty (Shea, Motiwalla & Lewis, 2001; Sherer & Shea, 2002). At the same time, the technological barriers to online education are steadily being eroded. Thus, online delivery methods have become more effective and cost efficient (Vogel & Klassen, 2001; Gallagher & Newman, 2002).

The emergence of online education has not escaped the attention of researchers. For example, there has been a considerable amount of research into the characteristics of faculty most suitable for the delivery of online courses (Clay, 1999; Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000; Williams, 2003). There is also a considerable body of research on student behavior and student learning once students are enrolled in an online program (Conrad, 2002; Kelsey & D'Souza, 2004). However, there is a surprising dearth of research on the question which students should be targeted for online programs. For instance, it is almost received wisdom that online education should primarily be targeted at part-time adult students (Shea, Motiwalla, & Lewis, 2001). However, there is at least some anecdotal evidence that suggests that this assumption needs to be refined. A few years ago, one of the authors was heavily involved in a Master's program in Computer-Based Management Information Systems at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. The program was aimed at mature students who typically had at least three years of work experience after their first degree and were in full-time employment, in other words, exactly the population that, according to the common assumption about online students, should be targeted for online education. For a number of reasons, the instructor considered it preferable to deliver a limited number of courses online. Unfortunately, any attempt at delivering any course online met with considerable resistance from the students. The students seemed to prefer coming to class for two evenings a week and the entire Saturday, rather than take the course online.

Given the fact that not all part-time adult students appear to have a positive

attitude towards online education, it seems warranted to investigate which students should be targeted. Which students are likely to have a positive attitude to online education, and what are the reasons for their attitude? This article presents an exploratory study aimed at answering some of these questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One noteworthy attempt at answering the question which students are most suitable for online education is Dick, Case, and Burns (2002), who set out to determine the attitudes of different groups of students to distance education, and the reasons for these attitudes. They considered five distinct groups: (a) predominantly first and second year undergraduate students at a US university, enrolled in a face-to-face introductory Information Systems Management course; (b) predominantly final year undergraduate students at a US university enrolled in a face-to-face Database course; (c) MBA-type students at an Australian university enrolled in a face-to-face Information Systems Management course; (d) MBA-type students at an Australian university taking the same course delivered primarily by distance; and (e) MBA students at a US university enrolled in an Information Systems Management course, delivered face-to-face to some and by way of full teleconferencing to others.

In general, the students enrolled in face-to-face courses were most opposed to distance education, and generally saw it as of lesser quality. The perceptions of students enrolled in a course delivered by distance were almost diametrically opposed. Dick et al. (2002) also found some interesting differences between Australian and US students with the former in general being more positive about distance education. However, one of the most striking findings of the Dick et al. (2002) study was that there were significant variations within groups. For example, on a survey question asking whether they agreed with the statement that they preferred distance education, the mean for the final year US students was 3.52 (out of a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating complete disagreement), suggesting a clear non-preference for distance education for this group. However, a sizeable minority (16.5%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer distance education, while 32.5% were neutral.

The within-group variation that Dick et al. (2002) found clearly raises the question whether one can uncover what factors determine the attitude of the student. Dick (2001) noticed an analogy between online education and telecommuting and draws on the telecommuting literature to derive a number of factors that are likely to play a role in shaping a student's attitude to online education. One can group the factors into three categories, namely (a) those related to the student's perception of the material to be mastered and the student's confidence with the technology, (b) those related to the student's perception of the advantages and drawbacks of online education, and finally, (c) what one might call "external" factors.

The first set of factors concerns the student's perception of the task and their confidence with the delivery mechanism. Students who are confident that they will be able to deal with the material presented in the course without frequent interaction with their peers or their instructor are more likely to have a positive perception of online education (Driver, 2002). This leads to the first of three working hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The more familiar the student is with the material covered in a particular course, the more likely he or she is to have a positive attitude towards online delivery of the course.

The second set of factors is related to the student's perception of the advantages of online education, such as greater flexibility and convenience, and about the perceived drawbacks, such as less interaction with peers or instructors, and the suspicion that the quality of online education might not match that of a face-to-face course (Kelsey & D'Souza, 2003). Another perceived drawback of online education that might influence students against this form of content delivery is the lack of social context, such as missed opportunities for networking and establishing friendships, leadership development possibilities and proper team experiences, a lack of stimulating intellectual discussions, and social isolation (Demirdjian, 2002; Liaw & Huang, 2000). A student who strongly believes the advantages to hold true is likely to have a more positive attitude towards online education, while a student who strongly believes in its drawbacks is likely to have a more negative attitude. This leads to the following working hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The more convinced a student is of the advantages of online education, the more likely he or she is to have a positive attitude towards online education.

The final set of factors constitutes what one might call "external factors", and concerns the student's perception of the institution's capabilities to deliver online education. Thus, a student is more likely to have a positive attitude towards online education if he or she believes that the institution can deliver online courses that are as good as the face-to-face versions. This, among other things, depends on the student's confidence in the ability of the instructors to deliver material in this mode, the instructors' motivation to put their full effort into online course development and delivery, and the institution's ability to provide and support the required technology infrastructure (Barker, 2003; Gallagher & Newman, 2002; Marsden, 2003; Taylor, 2003). This leads to the final working hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The more confident the student is that the institution can deliver online courses as well as face-to-face courses, the more likely he or she is to have a positive attitude towards online education.

This article reports on an exploratory study aimed at determining the importance of these factors to a student's attitude towards online education.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A self-administered survey was distributed to graduate students enrolled in a face-to-face MBA program at a medium-sized private university in the Southeastern United States. The MBA program enrolled both full-time and part-time students. It offered both 1.5 credit hour and 3 credit hour courses. Both types of courses were delivered over a normal 15 week semester. Courses are classified as core, foundation, or elective. Most of the core and foundation courses were 1.5 credit hours.

The questionnaire was given in class to 90 students and 76 usable questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 84.4%). The classes surveyed were stratified based on their level (core, foundation or elective). Within these three groups, the sampling of the classes was random.

Questionnaire

To conduct the research, a questionnaire, the full text of which is included in Appendix A, was designed consisting of the following sets of questions:

- demographic questions;
- questions about the number of courses a student would take if available in an online format, and in what fields and at what level;
- questions about the perception of the advantages and drawbacks of online education;
- questions asking respondents to rate their computer skills and the quality of their equipment, and to indicate previous experiences with online education;
- questions about the students' perception about the institution's capability to provide productive online education.

The majority of the questions were based on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 signifying strong agreement and 5 signifying strong disagreement. The questionnaire had been validated and refined in two pilot studies.

Statistical Analysis

The answers to questions with a Likert scale were coded in the expected way, that is, strong agreement was coded as 1, agreement as 2, and so on. This allowed the calculation of Pearson correlations between the various questions. To determine whether there were differences between specific demographic groups in their willingness to take a particular number of 1.5 credit hour or 3

credit hour courses online, Chi-Square tests (χ^2) were conducted. χ^2 tests were also used to determine whether the level of a course or the content of the course made a difference in a student's willingness to take the course online.

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 1 displays overall percentages and percentages by demographic subgroups of the number of courses students would take online if available.

In general, the students in this study appeared reluctant to enroll in online classes. Twenty-six percent (26%) indicated that they would not consider enrolling in any 1.5 credit hour course, while 41% would not try any 3 credit hour course. Moreover, of those who indicated that they would enroll in online courses, the vast majority would not take more than three courses.

An analysis of the patterns of response within the various groups shows that only the difference in gender and the difference in national origin are significant, and only for 1.5 credit hour courses. There are no differences in any category for 3 credit hour courses. Perhaps most important in the con-

Table 1
Number of 1.5 and 3 Credit Courses Students Would Enroll In

		N	1.5 credit hour courses				3 credit hour courses			
			None (%)	1-3 (%)	4-6 (%)	6+ (%)	None (%)	1-3 (%)	4-6 (%)	6+ (%)
ALL		76	26	53	13	8	41	43	7	9
Gender	Male	44	27.3	43.2	15.9	13.6	38.6	40.9	6.8	13.6
	Female	32	25.0	65.6	9.4	--	43.8	46.9	6.3	3.1
Status	FT	39	20.5	51.3	20.5	7.7	35.9	54.5	5.1	12.8
	PT	35	31.4	48.7	5.7	8.6	45.7	45.5	5.7	5.7
National Origin	US	55	27.3	56.4	5.5	10.9	45.5	66.7	5.5	9.1
	Intern'l	20	25.0	40.0	35.0	--	30.0	33.3	5.0	10.0
Prior major	Business	45	28.9	42.2	20.0	8.9	34.8	44.2	11.6	9.3
	Other	31	22.6	67.7	3.2	6.5	51.6	41.9	3.2	3.2

Note: χ^2 tests indicate that there are significant differences in the pattern of responses by gender and national origin for 1.5 credit hour courses ($\chi^2 = 10.70$, df 3, $p = .05$ for gender and $\chi^2 = 12.75$, df 3, $p = .01$ for national origin). None of the other differences are significant.

text of the current study is that there is no difference in the pattern of responses between part-time and full-time students.

To determine whether familiarity with a subject influenced a student's attitude (H 1), students who had previously indicated that they were prepared to enroll in an online class were asked which subjects and which level of courses they would be likely to enroll in. Table 2 presents the percentage of students who strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition to enroll in an online course at a particular level and in a specific subject area, the percentage of students who were neutral and the percentage of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposition.

The results show a significant difference both between subject areas and between levels. Students seemed significantly more willing to enroll in courses in some subject areas, such as IT Management, Management and Marketing, than in courses in other subject areas, such as Accounting, Eco-

Table 2
Course Level and Subjects Students Would Enroll In

		N	(Strongly) agreed (%)	Neutral (%)	(Strongly) disagreed (%)
Accounting	Core	57	54	12	33
	Foundation	58	24	24	52
	Elective	58	34	16	50
Economics	Core	57	53	19	28
	Foundation	57	26	29	45
	Elective	54	50	26	47
Finance	Core	58	41	19	40
	Foundation	58	21	24	55
	Elective	54	50	22	28
IT Management	Core	57	60	12	28
	Foundation	57	49	14	37
	Elective	55	44	20	36
Management	Core	58	60	21	19
	Foundation	58	43	31	26
	Elective	57	40	28	32
Marketing	Core	58	55	22	22
	Foundation	58	43	31	26
	Elective	58	43	31	26

Note: χ^2 tests indicate that there are significant differences in the pattern of responses both for subject area and for level of the course ($\chi^2 = 37.2$, *df* 10, $p = .001$ for subject area, and $\chi^2 = 29.05$, *df* 4, $p = .001$ for level of course).

nomics or Finance. Also, students seemed significantly more willing to enroll in core courses than the more advanced elective courses.

The survey instrument also contained a set of questions to determine the extent to which a student's perception of the alleged advantages and drawbacks of online education influenced their attitude (H 2), as well as to determine whether the student's perception of the institutional capability to deliver online courses influenced their attitude (H 3). Very few correlations were found between the alleged advantages and drawbacks and the number of online courses a student was willing to enroll in. The only exceptions were a correlation between the number of 1.5 credit hour courses a student was willing to take and their perception of the importance of peer interaction, the perceived convenience of online courses and the perceived flexibility, all at $p = .01$. Students who rated peer interaction as important were willing to enroll in significantly fewer online courses than those who rated peer interaction as less important. In a similar vein, students who more strongly agreed with the proposition that online courses were more convenient for them, or would give them greater flexibility, were prepared to enroll in significantly more online courses.

The only factors that were significantly related ($p = .01$) to the number of 3 credit hour courses that students were willing to enroll in were the perceived importance of faculty interaction, the perceived importance of the reliability of a computer system, and the perceived ability of the university to offer technical support. In all cases the relationship was as predicted: The more important faculty interaction or reliability of a computer system was to a student and the less confident the student was in the ability of the institution to provide adequate technical support, the fewer the number of 3 credit hour courses the student was likely to take.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this exploratory study are, in general, negative in that they showed only a very limited correlation between students' perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks of online education and their attitude towards online education (H 2). There were weak correlations between perceived flexibility and perceived convenience and the number of 1.5 credit hour courses, but no correlation between these factors and the number of 3 credit hour courses students were willing to enroll in. Similarly, students who valued peer interaction and faculty interaction had a more negative attitude towards online education (for 1.5 credit hour and 3 credit hour courses respectively). There is also some weak evidence that students who had doubts about the reliability of computer systems or the institution's ability to provide technical support had a more negative attitude towards online education (but only for 3 credit hour courses) (H 3).

Similarly, the study found relatively few differences between the different demographic groups in the study and their attitude to online education. For 1.5 credit hour courses, males seemed more prepared to take online courses than females, and US students seemed more willing to take online courses than international students. The difference between males and females may simply be a reflection of the well-documented gap between males and females in perceived computer efficacy (Durndell & Haag, 2002), and the results did indeed show a significant correlation between gender and a student's confidence in his or her computer abilities. Similar considerations may explain the slightly lower interest in 1.5 credit hour online courses of international students, although the results did not show a significant correlation between national origin and perceived computer efficacy. However, there was no difference between full-time and part-time students. In other words, this exploratory study indicates that the common assumption that online education is particularly appealing to part-time students may need to be qualified.

The only significant results concerned the level and subject area of courses. Among the students who had indicated a willingness to enroll in online courses, there were significant differences in the subject area that they would be interested in. Courses in IT Management, Marketing and Management seemed far more likely to attract students that courses in Accounting, Finance or Economics. Similarly, there were significant differences in the level of courses students were prepared to enroll in, although the pattern is not as clear-cut here. Foundation courses appeared more attractive than core or elective courses, but there seemed little difference between the last two categories. One can of course, speculate as to the reasons for these findings. Did students have a better prior knowledge of IT Management, Marketing and Management than of Accounting, Finance and Economics, or is it the case that the former subjects are perceived to be easier than the latter? Clearly, if the latter is the correct assumption, then there would seem to be a rationale for delivering the "easier" courses online and limiting face-to-face courses to those courses that are perceived to be more difficult.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In general the results of this exploratory study were negative in that there were very few correlations between students' attitudes to distance education and the independent variables under consideration. The only factors that appeared to make a significant difference were subject area and level of courses. Students appeared more prepared to enroll in online courses in some subject areas than in others. Moreover, online foundation courses seemed more popular than either core or elective courses. There were no significant differences between part-time and full-time students.

This study, like others, has its shortcomings. The primary shortcoming is that

all students surveyed in this study were enrolled in a face-to-face MBA program. While the particular institution at which the study was conducted does not offer an online MBA program, there is a host of such programs available. At least some of the participants in the study may therefore have consciously opted for a face-to-face program and this may have biased the results. Also, the number of respondents is somewhat limited and although the results might provide an indication, further research is needed to confirm the findings, and, assuming that the findings indeed generalize, to explain them. For example, is it indeed the case that there is a gender difference in attitudes towards online education, and if so, what is the explanation? Also, is it indeed the case that there are differences in students' willingness to enroll in online courses depending on the level and the subject area of the course, and, if so, what is the explanation?

More studies will have to be conducted to overcome some of the shortcomings mentioned. The range of programs studied will have to be expanded and will have to compare students enrolled in face-to-face undergraduate programs to students enrolled in online undergraduate programs within the same field of study. Future studies should also include a broader range of institutions of higher education to determine whether there are differences between for instance research and teaching institutions or private and state institution. More studies are needed to closely examine the importance, if any, of subject areas and, assuming that the current results are verified, determine the reasons for the preference for online delivery of courses in some subject areas. Finally, issues of gender differences and disparities between US and international students should be further investigated.

These further studies will help form a clearer impression of who wants online education. A more clearly defined picture will benefit institutions both with regards to planning marketing efforts and also with regards to the development of online courses. Online education can undoubtedly provide benefits both for those who are likely to embrace it and for those institutions that are in a position to provide high quality online education. However, for online education to fulfill its promise, it is crucial that it be targeted at the most receptive students. If the results of the current study can indeed be generalized, the assumption that online education should primarily be targeted at part-time students is not warranted. A more sophisticated answer to the question who should be targeted for online education is clearly called for.

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APPENDIX A: ONLINE EDUCATION SURVEY

Introductory Questions

1. If offered in the MBA program, how many online 1.5 credit classes would you enroll in?
   None 1-3 4-6 6+
2. If offered in the MBA program, how many online 3-credit classes would you enroll in?
   None 1-3 4-6 6+

If no to both questions, skip to section 2

3. What kind of online format would you prefer?
   Self-administered Real Time Broadcast Video Taped Other
4. What percentage of the courses should be offered online?
   100% 75% 50% 25 % None N/A

Section 1. The following section will ask you a few questions regarding the departments you would be most likely to take online courses in:

ACCOUNTING ONLINE COURSES								
5. I would take foundation courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
6. I would take integrated core courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
7. I would take elective courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
ECONOMICS ONLINE COURSES								
8. I would take foundation courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
9. I would take integrated core courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
10. I would take elective courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
FINANCE ONLINE COURSES								
11. I would take foundation courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
12. I would take integrated core courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
13. I would take elective courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT ONLINE COURSES								
14. I would take foundation courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
15. I would take integrated core courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
16. I would take elective courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
MANAGEMENT ONLINE COURSES								
17. I would take foundation courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
18. I would take integrated core courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A
19. I would take elective courses	Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree	N/A

MARKETING ONLINE COURSES

20. I would take foundation courses Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A
21. I would take integrated core courses Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A
22. I would take elective courses Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

Section 2. Some more general questions regarding your attitude towards online classes:

1. Previous knowledge of the material is important in taking an online course

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

2. Taking an online course will give more flexibility than a traditional, classroom course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

3. On online course will be more convenient than a traditional, classroom course for me.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

4. It is important for me that the quality of the course content of an online course matches a classroom course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

5. It is important to me that faculty is as accessible to me during an online course as during an in-class course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

6. Making sure that there is enough faculty interaction will be an important criterion in deciding on an online course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

7. Ensuring sufficient peer interaction is an important aspect of deciding on an online course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

8. Reliability of the computer system is important in an online course.

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

Section 3. Some questions about your and the university's access to technology which might affect the delivery of online courses

1. I have a high-speed Internet connection, such as DSL or cable modem.
   Yes No Don't know
2. I have enough (8MB) video memory to handle streaming video.
   Yes No Don't know
3. I feel confident enough in my own computer literacy to enroll in an online course.Strongly
   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A
4. I have confidence that faculty have sufficient technical background to deliver online classes in the same quality as in-class courses

   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

5. I have confidence that the university can provide the technical support necessary.
   Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree N/A

Section 4. The following questions are for classification purposes only. All of your responses will remain anonymous and confidential

1. What is your gender?
   Male Female
2. At this university, are you classified as a(n):
   Part-time student Full-time student
3. At this university, are you classified as a(n):
   International US
4. My undergraduate degree was:
   Business Non-business