

Chapter 6

Computing Postgraduate Programmes in the UK and Brazil: Learning from Experience in Distance Education with Web 2.0 Support

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education can benefit from experiences and collaborations across different countries and cultures. The authors carried out a study to analyse the experiences of the use of Web 2.0 tools in distance education in the UK and propose a set of lessons that can be applied in the Brazilian context. The recent economic growth in Brazil has resulted in a strong demand for further education. Distance education has emerged as a strong contestant to address this demand. The authors present, in this chapter, the case of the provision of postgraduate education for professionals at a distance. Distance education in Brazil is currently gathering support as it offers great potential to address the big geographic and social divides. However, there are many barriers and misconceptions that perpetuate a climate of distrust.

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Their study draws a set of lessons learned focusing on the benefits that distance education can bring to the development of professional postgraduate education in technical and engineering areas, in the light of the experience of The Open University (OU) in the UK. They emphasise the support that Web 2.0 can bring to these experiences, but also draw attention to the quality that the production process plays in the learning experiences. These lessons address the following: support for skills development with Web 2.0 technologies, the role of the digital educator, open educational resources, open education and social dimension, and quality and pedagogy in the educational process.

INTRODUCTION

Education, in an era of globalization, can benefit from many opportunities for collaboration and mutual enrichment across experiences in different contexts. It is relevant to look at comparable situations in different countries, to understand important factors of success in a specific situation, and to discuss what can be learned, adapted, and applied elsewhere.

This chapter presents the results of a study of two countries, Brazil and the UK. This study was intended to understand their current situation in terms of postgraduate education, and what could be learned from experience in the development of distance education using Web 2.0 tools. Our case study presents a contribution to the future of postgraduate education for professionals at a distance in Brazil, in the context of the current high demand imposed by its fast economic growth.

Brazil is a country in rapid development but with strong regional inequalities. It has a population of 190,732,694¹, distributed in a geographically large area. Governmental efforts are making the access to the Internet widely spread. According to CGI.br², the Brazilian Web has been growing since mid 90s, both in the number of users and in the range of services and applications provided through the network. Internet usage by the Brazilian population has raised from 37 million users in 2005 to 65 million users in 2009. Current statistics indicate that 45% of the population have access to the Internet³. The Brazilian plan for postgraduate education 2011-2020 (MEC, 2010) has as one of its objectives to cope with the industry's demands for qualifications. A recent study carried out by Brasscom⁴ (2011), pointed out a need of 78,000 professionals whereas the education sector will only provide half of this demand. Federal, state, and private universities provide full Internet support in their postgraduate education. Thus, this scenario creates a unique opportunity to explore how Web 2.0 technologies can support the promotion of postgraduate distance education in Computing in Brazil, learning from the experience in the UK.

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