

talking point

Professional Associations:

The new universities?

by Alan Nelson



We hear a lot about the knowledge worker of the future. The government are keen to convince us that a culture of lifelong learning is critical to the future of the economy. But what does this mean in reality?

If the lessons of the US are applicable here it will mean a massive increase in the demand for flexible, adult, vocational education: over 25 year-olds wanting qualifications to further their career prospects.

So who will provide this education?

The obvious answer would appear to be the universities, but I am not so sure. Most universities seem to rely pretty heavily on their brand. Every student knows that a degree from Durham will open more doors for them than one from Humberside. And that has little to do with the content of the course.

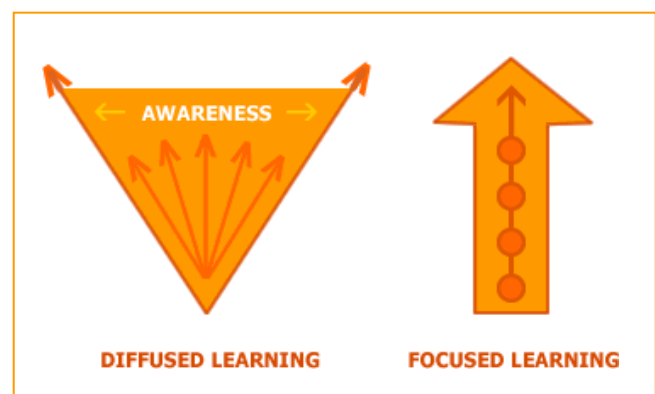
Does the university brand carry the same weight in the professional market? My company depends pretty heavily on technology. When we need someone to make sure our web servers don't fall over, we look for someone with the appropriate Microsoft Certification, not someone with a first degree in computer science. Likewise, if you were the manager of a retail chain and needed to find really good supervisory managers, you could do worse than look for graduates of the University of McDonalds.

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“That isn't education – that's just training.” I hear the universities cry. Personally, I've never been sure how much this distinction mattered. Instinctively, I feel that education should be more applied, but at the same time I am very aware that mine was not and that the development of a critical faculty has been very important to me – more so than any facts or skills I learnt.

Learning: Diffused or focused?

But the learning you need at different stages in your life changes. We find it useful to differentiate between two types of learning: focused and diffused.



A university degree is a good example of focused learning. A group of students are enrolled in a degree programme in Physics. They have all qualified by satisfying a set of entrance requirements – they probably all have physics A' Level. So they start from the same point. They then follow a predetermined curriculum, working their way through the topics in the same sequence. It is convenient for the institution to take them through at the same pace and it has some educational merit – they can learn from each other.

The process is essentially linear.

Contrast that with what goes on in most adult learning. Each learner arrives with different knowledge and experience. They may all have different objectives, each of which are valid for them.

This is particularly true in our work with professional associations. They have members who are required to learn and keep up to date with developments in their professions but they each come to the programmes with different specialisations, levels of experience, knowledge and skill. They also have different objectives for their learning. So not only are they starting from a different place but they are heading somewhere different too. In that context, making them all go through the same material in a linear way doesn't make much sense. Offering them personalised routes depending on their objectives and their preferred style of learning isn't just a nice idea – it's essential. We call this diffused learning.

I really question whether Universities are best placed to deliver 'diffused learning' when they are so blatantly set up to deliver a 'focused' experience.

That is not to say it is impossible for them. We have worked with one University that has successfully adapted to delivering what adult professional learners want. But they have done so by creating a whole new campus, some way away – both physically and in spirit – from the traditional body of the institution.

The opportunity for Professional Associations

So what does all this mean for the UK and for Europe? Traditional universities are unlikely to transform themselves into customer focused demand led businesses. Who will fill the gap is not yet clear, but what does seem clear to me is that, right now, there is a tremendous opportunity for professional associations.

More and more people are realising that completing all their education at the start of their career and then using their CV to explain how they have developed as they move from employer to employer, does not give them enough credibility. As we define ourselves more and more by what we do – accountant, facilities manager, project manager –

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rather than by the sector that our current employer operates in, we need a passport that we can carry with us, telling prospective employers or clients what we have done and what we have learnt. No one is better qualified to stamp that passport than the professional association.

Meeting the demand through the Internet

But how are professional associations going to gear up to meet the demand? It will mean

being more flexible in the structure of qualifications as well as a massive increase in scale. Whether by providing lower level access programmes, or by offering certificated units that require less of an all or nothing commitment from the learner, it will be those that are most customer oriented that will be most successful. Face-to-face instruction can only meet a fraction of the need. Distance education will be critical, and what is the cheapest and most effective way to provide distance learning materials? – the Internet.

Initially many associations were concerned that their members were not ready to learn in new ways, and worried that they did not have access to the Internet. Over the past 5 years this has changed. Nearly all associations we talk to admit that their membership is comfortable with and have access to the Internet. Some, more forward thinking associations, are moving everything they do online.

Taking the first steps

So although I am stressing the enormity of the challenge, it doesn't mean that the solution has to be daunting. You don't need to conquer the world straight away and the initial step does not need to be a big or expensive one.

Here are 3 examples of how professional associations have put a foot on the first step to enhancing their professional development using the web.

CPA Ireland, the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) and the Institute of Direct Marketing (IDM) have all taken a step into new territory, but in each case, that step is based very firmly in their own experience.

IRRV have long published distance learning materials to support the training of newly recruited Benefits officers. The demand for the materials was increasing and the IRRV were investing ever more money on developing, producing and administering their distribution.

The move online, for them, was an obvious one. Says David Magor, Chief Executive, IRRV

"This project enables us to reach more members, reduce costs and spend less time on administration."

For the CPA in Ireland their need was a different one. They had a membership of 2,500 who needed to meet the required number of CPE hours before the end of year. The CPE were looking for a cost effective, risk free and flexible way of enhancing the CPE options they offered their members. The results, according to Colleen Quinn, Deputy Chief Executive, CPA Ireland

"We have been able to provide a new service for our members, enabling them to undertake CPE at times when it would otherwise have been impossible, without significant upfront investment."

For the IDM, the drivers were again different. They currently produce their own learning materials and were keen to learn about online delivery of material. Most importantly they wanted to develop the expertise in house to produce their own online courses.

Working within an existing technical shell, they have been developing their own programmes for six months now. For them it has been a cost effective route to building and managing their own portfolio, whilst retaining the support of experts.

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**Colleen Quinn, Deputy Chief Executive,
CPA Ireland CAN GO**

These approaches are not better or worse than each other; each suits the organisation that it comes from. Two things though are important:

- Each organisation has made explicit their reasons for doing this
- None of them are straying too far outside their normal expertise

Professional associations know their members. They are ideally placed to serve them by offering relevant and applicable recognised education. The question that remains is which of them will be sufficiently flexible and reactive to accept the challenge and realise their potential. We know – we are working with them.

If you are planning to move into online education, here are some simple questions you could ask yourself that might help you to understand what you could achieve:

- Will you generate additional income?
- Will you reduce existing costs?
- Will you increase student numbers?
- Will you learn everything you can?

You need to answer “Yes” to at least one of the first three and to the fourth. Two things are critical as you go forward:

- Watch and learn from your own experience, not from someone else’s
- Get Help

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It has appeared in the following publications:

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Marchmont Flash *BAOL Bitz*