

BI Norwegian School of Management, Distance Education Centre

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	BI Distance Education Centre
URL of institution	www.bi.no ; www.bi.edu
Country	Norway
Number of employees	17 full-time, around 50 part-time teacher from academic staff
Levels in the educational systems	Tertiary and vocational training
Interviewed persons	Tone Lømo, Director, Distance Education Centre Tormod Lunde, Head of studies, Distance Education Centre

Introduction

Norwegian School of Management is non-profit private education institution. BI Norwegian School of Management, Distance Education Centre is, as the name implies, a part of this institution. The Norwegian School of Management is recognised by the Ministry of Education and receives government grants covering around 10-15% of operating costs. Consequently, the institution is largely dependent on student fees for its operations.

This interview focuses on BI Norwegian School of Management, Distance Education Centre (BI DE). BI DE provides courses at higher educational level and within vocational training. BI DE does not employ full-time academic staff for tutoring. Rather, courses are based on part-time employment of academic staff members from the main branch of the Norwegian School of Management. Therefore, the number of part-time employees is rather high compared with the number of full-time employees.

BI DE develops both courses aimed at an open market and courses tailor made for corporate partners.

Contextual factors concerning online education in Norway

Norway has a total population of 4.6 million with a common language. The target group for BI DE is mainly the Norwegian adult population.

Penetration of technology for online learning is high. For instance, over 50 percent of people in the main age target group have broadband Internet access at home, 75 percent of homes have PCs, 60 percent Internet access and nearly 60 percent of the population use PC on a daily basis.

It is assumed that, because of the relatively high level of computer literacy in the population, and not least, governmental support for distance education in general over many decades and for online learning the last 15 years both through legislation and financial support to students

and institutions, market acceptance for online learning is high relative to most other European countries.

History

BI DE was founded in 1989. The first students were enrolled in 1990, and from the start operations were based on distance education using electronic communication. Thus BI DE has no history with (first generation) correspondence based distance education, but went straight to a second generation model based on electronic communication.

The technical systems for delivery and administration of online education at BI DE, has to a large extent been developed by the institution itself. To begin with, system development was done in close cooperation with the IT department of the main branch of BI (Norwegian School of Management). An example of a system that was developed is the first electronic communication system, called BIT (BI Teleconference System). The system was used up to 1996. After this, all courses were Internet based, and BIT was replaced by the in house developed LMS “Apollon”. By this time, BI DE had established its own IT staff, and “Apollon” was developed largely by this staff. Today, the in house developed systems that form the back bone of the operations of BI DE are refined and improved by the IT staff of BI DE.

This model has given BI DE several advantages. First, because of high technological competence in house, BI DE could start with large scale online teaching fairly early (1997). Second, the fact that systems are developed and refined in house allows BI DE to adjust them to their changing needs. This is different from a situation one might have had if the systems were bought from commercial developers, in which case one might have to replace systems if a desired improvement could not be provided by the manufacturer. Both the ability to start early with online teaching and the flexibility that in house developed systems allow are seen by the institution as vital for their success.

Since the start, courses have been subject to thorough evaluation where both students, cooperate partners and faculty members participate. BI DE has not carried out systematic research on distance education, but kept an open eye on experiences made by other online education institutions and companies.

Technical issues

Seen from a student perspective, courses are generally based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software.

From the institutions perspective, there is a strong focus on integration of different systems. For example, the administrative module of the LMS is well integrated with the student administrative system. This allows administrators to easily enrol students and establish virtual classrooms, student groups and so forth. Students have easy access to both pedagogical and administrative services. For example, students may enrol themselves for exam during a self service module.

The ability to provide such integration while the various systems are being constantly refined is greatly facilitated by the fact that the systems are mostly developed in house (as indicated above). BI DE believes that integration of IT-systems is an essential factor for success, and

expects this to be of even greater importance in the future for those institutions that want to succeed in the e-learning market.

Courses

BI Norwegian School of Management is a business school covering a wide range of subjects within finance, administration and management from bachelor to doctorate level. The Distance Education Centre offers these subjects mostly on the bachelor level to adult learners and businesses. In addition, BI DE provides courses within vocational training. Within this portfolio, no particular group of subjects is significantly more important than others in generating course enrolments and income for BI DE.

Similarly, BI DE feels that most of the subjects in the portfolio of BI Norwegian School of Management are suitable for online teaching. In other words, there are no substantial differences in “onlineability” among the subjects that BI DE can offer. The only exception is mathematics, where onlineability is limited by lack of effective means of expressing symbols and formulas electronically.

Rather, the two factors determining whether a course is developed and offered or not is market considerations and the need to be predictable within some subjects areas. According to changes in the market, courses may be added or removed. In areas where students follow larger programs, for example bachelor programs, courses must on the other hand be provided continuously in order to make it possible for students to finish degrees they have started on.

BI DE has flexible start up and progression in courses. Exams, on the other hand, are arranged at pre determined dates, often twice a year. Thus, there is a high degree of flexibility in time for students, only limited by fixed dates for exams.

Management, strategy and attitudes

The decision of establishing the distance education unit was decided by the top management at BI and the management has been supportive throughout. However, BI DE is a business unit that has to be self sustained, and support from the top management can therefore only be counted on if incomes at least balance expenses. Throughout its history, this condition has been met, and BI DE has had sufficient outcomes to pay its own expenses and in addition provided a profit for the main branch of BI. Incomes are largely based on student fees and a small support of government money.

BI DE has a business strategy plan with an action plan that is evaluated yearly within the business unit, covering the following fields: study program development, pedagogical and technological development, marketing, administration, organization. The strategic plans are in general followed up loyally by employees of BI and BI DE.

In addition, BI DE assists with general implementation of ICT in the on campus teaching at BI. This is organised through an e-learning centre that is located at BI DE and serves the entire organisation. The unit is responsible for developing content, following up e-learning projects and giving input to BI strategies. More flexible education in the regional schools as well as the central business school in Oslo is the main goal.

Teachers and e-moderators are recruited from the academic staff at BI. They are either paid extra for this or they get reduced teaching loads at BI. The attitudes among the e-moderators that have been recruited by BI DE are very good. There has always been a focus on

information and development of the teaching staff through participation in conferences, seminars and workshops. Many of the teachers have been engaged since the establishment of the Distance Education Centre in 1989-90. Still there is a continuous need for online-teaching-discussions and following-ups – both individually and in groups. It is important for BI DE what the teacher finds it necessary to improve or develop. BI DE therefore pays careful attention to their needs. Once a year BI DE also arranges together with the Bachelor program department a so-called “Pedagogical Inspiration Day” where all teachers can share experiences and ideas in the field of online learning. Although a significant proportion of the academic staff at BI is unfamiliar with or sceptical about distance education, BI DE has not had problems with recruiting members of this staff for distance education.

Many teachers regard the online teaching job as part-time work that comes in addition to their regular job. The workload may vary, but the online teaching contracts are always carefully discussed with each teacher so that he or she should be properly made aware of the total work. Incentives are given according to workload or tasks so that the teacher may choose between distance education work and teaching full-time students. BI DE regards this as very important. The tasks are predictable, but sometimes the amount of students may vary. The teacher is always guaranteed a lump sum for teaching online – and with larger student groups he or she is paid extra per head.

Quality is monitored through evaluation and student feed back. Thus, academic staff members know that they are monitored. At BI D, one feels that this is an important stimulus for teachers to do a good job, and that quality monitoring therefore is one of the keys to the success of BI DE. As part of BI, BI DE follows the quality systems laid down in EQUIS (a well-known European quality and accreditation system of business schools) and NOKUT (The Norwegian organization for quality and accreditation), but also rely to a certain extent on the quality system developed for distance education in Norway – maintained through the work of NADE (Norwegian Association of Distance Education).

BI Norwegian School of Management has a high credibility both formally and informally with the government and public administration. BI differs, however, from the public universities and colleges in Norway in the sense that it is a private non-profit institution with some financial support from the government. Governmental support covers about 10-15 % of total costs.

Economy

Because BI DE has had to be economically self sustainable since the start, and because governmental funding is and has been modest, cost effectiveness has always been vital for survival. Income from online education has depended and still depends on a number of factors, in particular the market and marketing activities. There has, however, up to 2005 been a growing and steady demand for online learning.

In this situation, there has always been a certain pressure to be flexible and able to change rapidly. Thus, courses may be added or removed according to market requirements. However, a large number of the study programs are not changed. Because students are in these programs for several years, the programs must be offered continuously. Teaching contracts are made per term to allow for market changes. There is, however, a large stability in the teaching staff, and a relatively large continuity as regards the study programs offered.

Additional factors

Being part of a larger institution allows for stability in the recruitment of staff, as well as students. The administrative staff has many years of experience in the field of distance education and the teaching concept is based on well-functioning pedagogical knowledge.

The fact that BI has a well-known brand in Norway is also of importance. Many of the students are adults who know the institution well – or are told by colleagues or employers about the programs. Many campus-students or adult evening class-students, who cannot follow the normal progression in their study programs, find it convenient to finish their studies by distance education.

Market orientation is also an important factor in order to obtain success. The study programs are therefore continually revised and developed and content is always based on the latest research. It has also been of particular importance to continually develop the technology used for online-teaching.

Conclusions

These factors are seen as vital for the success and survival of BI DE as a mega provider of online education:

- Early start with online teaching, which was possible because of high technological competence in house, has been vital for success later.
- High degree of integration of different IT-systems, which has been possible because much of the systems have been developed in house, is important for efficient operation of procedures and thus contributes to cost effectiveness.
- Teaching is monitored closely for quality and the teachers know this. This is seen as important for keeping quality of teaching at a high level.
- Teachers are paid according to their work load. This is seen as important for having motivated teachers.
- Being part of a large and well known (in Norway) institution contributes to stability in recruitment of staff and students.
- Market orientation and continuous revision of study programs to keep them up to date with latest research has been important for success.
- Continuous development of technology for online teaching has been important for success.