

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

General description of the institution

Norwegian School of Management is a non-profit private institution offering courses at higher education (tertiary) level and within vocational training. BI Norwegian School of Management, Distance Education Centre (BI DE) is, as the name implies, a part of this institution. Norwegian School of Management has about 340 academic staff members. A considerable number of these teach at BI DE. BI DE has about 8500 course enrolments per year.

Historical context

1. How would you describe the history of distance education in your institution?
We have a sixteen- year-old history of distance education in BI Norwegian School of Management (BI). The Distance Education was started in 1989. The first class in 1990 was in many ways early adapters of modern distance education, since electronic communications was an integrated part of the study concept. Thus, BI DE has not had a period with distance education based on a traditional correspondence school model. Rather, BI DE went straight to a technology based model.
2. How has competence in e-learning developed in your institution and how has it contributed to your success?
The knowledge of distance education methodology combined with modern technology competence has contributed largely to our success. The first communication system (called BIT= BI teleconference-system) was developed in close cooperation with the BI IT-department and used up to 1996, when Internet was implemented for the purpose of tutoring and communication. In 1997 all courses were internet-based and the self-developed e-learning system, called 'Apollon', was established. "Apollon" is a LMS. Thus, technological development at BI DE has been done by IT staff at in house in the main organization (BI). With the development of "Apollon", BI DE employed its own staff for technical development. Today, we refine and improves systems that have for a large part been developed in house. This allow us to (easily) adapt the systems to our own (local) needs. This is one of the keys to our success.

The fact that BE DE had considerable IT competence in house, allowed the us to adapt quickly to internet when this became widely available around 1995. This is partly why we consider having self made systems and in house technical competence as a key to our success.

3. Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process)?

It has definitely been a step-by-step process based on the experiences with the electronic classroom from the early nineties. When technology changed in the mid-nineties, we did not allow for any abruption in the use of electronic media since this was regarded as a very important part of the distance education concept.

4. How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research and how has this contributed to your success?

There have continuously been term evaluations by students and other users (cooperate partners) throughout the years, as well as regular evaluations by faculty in workshops and seminars. The development has always been in close cooperation with faculty and other users (administration and the learners themselves). As regards research, we have relied heavily on the experiences made by other online education institutions and companies. Throughout the years there has also been a wide range of projects together with corporate businesses and the faculty of BI.

Technical issues

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

As mentioned earlier, the IT department of BI Norwegian School of Management took part in the first developments of the so-called BIT-system. When we in 1995 decided that Internet was the future technology, we looked for partners who might offer a web-based learning tool, but this was an early phase in the development of e-learning. We therefore engaged our own IT-developers who had special Internet competence. They developed the first e-learning management system as early as in 1997.

6. To which extent are e-learning courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software? (in addition to what they have from before)

The e-learning platform development today is based on Microsoft dot.net-technology. The students do not have to buy any additional hardware or software to attend courses. However, students need to install free software to run java applets, Macromedia flash and read pdf-documents.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in e-learning in your institution? How has this contributed to your success?

The system is integrated with the student administration system (Banner) as well as other IT-systems used at BI. We also use standard third party IT-programs and software, that are integrated with the e-learning system. We believe that integration of IT-systems is an essential factor for success – and will be of even greater importance in the future for those institutions that want to succeed in the e-learning market.

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your e-learning administrative systems (from enrolment through delivery to certification)?

The administrative module of ‘Apollon’ enables all administrators to easily enroll students and establish virtual classrooms, groups etc. (integrated with the student administration system ‘Banner’). The fact that the e-learning system is developed at our own institutions allows for a rapid and innovative development of new modules. We regard this a great advantage in the development and business of distance education. ‘Banner’ allows for a wide range of services for administrative following-up of the students up to the certification of each student. It also includes “a web for student service” (self service-module for exam enrolment etc.) We might, however, have a potential in further exploring the question of automatisation. This may rationalize administrative work and other routines.

Courses

9. Which types of subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects?

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. BI is depending on continuous research and cooperation with corporate business, and this will influence the subjects taught. Each subject or field is therefore continuously developed – thus securing relevant and up-dated content. No particular group of subjects is (significantly) more important than others in generating course enrolments and income for BE DE.

10. How would you describe the “onlineability” of the subjects your institution has chosen for e-learning?

There is a relatively high degree of online-ability, especially as regards the ‘qualitative’ subjects. Mathematics is however at difficult subject to teach online (due to the existing editors). Most subjects, however, do easily follow our framework of teaching online. The virtual classroom is the main channel for teaching and communication. Discussion groups, net-meeting and virtual teamwork are thus an essential part of the concept. We are also continuously developing digital learning resources that are pre-produced, like videos, sound lectures, electronic tests, simulations etc.

11. Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?

There is flexibility in the start-up-phase, and of course in progression. The examination period is the same, however, as for the campus students. This means

that the students must decide in due time whether or not they will sit for their exams the same term as they are enrolled. Most students are part-time students and may use a longer progression period – these students will be advised to fulfill their exams when they are ready for it.

12. What is the role or importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers and among students themselves?

Since the majority of the students are adults who combine their studies with work and family obligations, asynchronous communication is the most preferred method between students and teachers and among the students. Some students, however, who are doing projects and group assignments prefer sometimes to use synchronous communication tools.

Management, strategy and attitudes

13. How would you describe involvement from the institution leadership in terms of being supportive, and how has this been important for success?

The decision of establishing the distance education unit was decided by the top management at BI, so they have always been supportive. The Distance Education Centre is one of many business units (there are 12 regional colleges in BI School of Management), so it has to be a self-reliant, productive unit. The income is based on the student fees and a smaller government support.

14. How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching? How has this affected your success?

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 we have recruited ourselves 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 to us what the teacher finds necessary to improve or develop. We therefore pay careful attention to their needs. Once a year The Distance Education Centre also arrange 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 are skeptical against distance education, BI DE has not had problems with recruiting members of this staff for distance education.

15. Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?

Strategic reports were of course made previous to the establishment of the Distance Education. In the BI strategy documents in the mid-nineties it was emphasized that the experiences with modern technology made at The Distance Education Centre should influence also other teaching at BI. After the EQUIS-accreditation of BI an ICT task force was set down to implement an e-learning system for all BI (2000-2002). After the implementation The E-learning Centre was established and organized as part of Distance Education Centre. Today this

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. The Distance Education Centre itself has of course 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.

16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education and has quality contributed to success?

As part of BI Norwegian School of Management The Distance Education Centre 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 we 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).

Quality is monitored through evaluation and student feed back. Thus, academic staff know that they are monitored. We feel that this is an important stimulus for them to do a good job, and that quality monitoring therefore is one of the keys to our success.

17. How would you describe the effectiveness of your administrative routines in online education?

Many years of experience with distance education logistics have allowed us to develop well-functioning routines. It is, however, sometimes a challenge to adapt the existing routines in BI effectively to distance education needs.

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

Many teachers regards 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. We regard this as very important. The tasks are predictable, but some times 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.

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions and how has this affected success?

We sometimes collaborate with corporate businesses and e-learning companies in the development of e-learning, but have more rarely common projects on e-learning with other educational institutions. We feel that we could have profited from more extensive cooperation, but we have not had the necessary resources to initiate this.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration and how has this been an important criterion for success?

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.

21. How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?
Well-functioning routines, great stability in the staff and good IT-systems are of course important factors in order to succeed.

Economy

22. How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution? How has cost-effectiveness affected success?

Apart from the cost of The E-learning Centre, which supports the whole school of management in the use and development of e-learning, we might say that the Distance Education Unit is a cost-effective business unit in BI. The yearly revenues have contributed to further development of the institution.

From early on in the history of BI DE, our unit has had to be economically self sustainable. With small amounts of governmental funding, cost-effectiveness has been vital for survival and success of BI DE.

23. To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?

This depends, of course, on various important factors: the market, our own marketing activities, the following up of these and the total resources (people and funding) given to this work. There has, however, up to 2005 been a growing and steady demand for online learning.

24. To which extent does your institution experience pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?

There has always been a certain pressure to be flexible and able to change rapidly in our institution, since we are a private business school. Thus, courses may be added or removed according to market requirements. However, a large number of the study programmes are not changed. Because students are in these programmes for several years, the programmes must be offered continuously. The courses within these programmes, as well as other courses, are revised regularly to keep them in track of the development within their subject areas.

25. To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?

Our 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

26. What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?

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 our 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.