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Delivering an online global Masters degree: How can we manage learning in a managed learning environment?

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## PROPOSAL:

### **Delivering an online global Masters degree: How can we manage learning in a managed learning environment?**

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This paper considers ways in which online education can be managed and monitored to ensure that independent learning is promoted and students gain access to high quality resources. Using a distance learning Masters course as a case study, we evaluate the effectiveness of four aspects of the online learning experience.

The past few years have seen dramatic changes in the way that higher education manages information through the growth of e-learning programmes. This is particularly apparent from the recent news that MIT intend to publish all lecture materials online (<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/nr/2001/ocw.html>). The use of the e-learning in education has also been heavily debated in the UK; for example Warwick University considered introducing a policy of mandatory laptops for all students (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/news/pr/education/326>)

Developing educational programmes that can be taught solely over the Internet has the distinct advantages of allowing universities to increase their marketplace globally as well as providing opportunities for widening access to education. It is with these benefits in mind that the Masters in Geographic Information (MGI) was developed at City University. Designed for delivery as either face to face or via distance learning the course is aimed at professional and part time applicants across the world. A managed learning environment (WebCT) is used to deliver the materials and facilitate student-tutor communication. One of the major strengths of e-learning is that students can be easily directed to online information sources. However, a concern is how to ensure that students on the distance programmes receive access to resources. The MGI has addressed this in two ways, firstly by establishing a virtual library of relevant information sources and secondly by establishing a distributed 'hub' from which students can download and upload their own spatial data.

We evaluate the dissemination of content-rich materials; the effectiveness of the threaded discussion forum for the exchange of ideas and learning support; the sharing of new (spatial) forms of data online; and the importance of the metaphor in information organisation. These aspects were evaluated through the use of qualitative and quantitative questionnaires, content analysis of WebCT discussion archives and web logs.

Several key findings emerge from our evaluation. Dissemination of information must be sensitively controlled in order to prevent information overload. Related to this is the management of threaded discussion lists. The 'cultural context' of discussion postings must be carefully managed to ensure that the medium fulfils its maximum potential. In addition, the form in which the information is given needs consideration as not all types of information are well served using current technologies. For example, spatial data sometimes need more graphical front ends in order to be shared and used effectively. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, any e-learning programme must be responsive to the continually evolving expectations of its users who may at differing times feel both challenged and liberated by this approach to education.