

Virtual Education: An Analysis of Actual and Potential Tourism Distance Learning.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the impact of Computer-Mediated Learning (CML) on tourism distance education. It researches CML in tourism distance education in New Zealand from the perspective of the student. It seeks to identify the key areas for improvement of present programmes with a view of optimising the opportunities arising from developments in the field of information technology.

Research to date in tourism distance education is limited. This is surprising since distance education provides educational opportunities that are open to all students including those constrained by time and distance from study centres. Traditionally educational researchers have focused on the teaching side (virtual instructor, textbook and delivery technologies) rather than on the learning side (learning motivations, learning experiences and learning outcomes) of distance education. Fortunately, the overemphasis on supply has slowly been replaced by recognizing that demand is critical to the education process. Researchers are now beginning to study distance learners in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with study programmes. This leads researchers to address the critical question surrounding the pedagogical effectiveness of distance learning technologies. The reaction of the learner to the method of course delivery is as central to this analysis.

This thesis explores the various perspectives that contribute to the distance learner's satisfaction. It identifies the importance of the Internet in tourism distance education, the challenge of facilitating staff-student and student-student interaction via this medium and the critical importance of student support in distance learning courses. It then recommends directions for further research in this field.