Synchronous Courses Attendance in Distance Higher Education: Case Study of a Computer Science Department

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Abstract : The use of videoconferencing platforms adapted to teaching offers students the opportunity to take distance education courses in much the same way as traditional in-class training. The sessions can be recorded and they allow students the option of following the courses synchronously or asynchronously. Three typical profiles can then be distinguished: students who choose to follow the courses synchronously, students who could attend the course in synchronous mode but choose to follow the session off-line, and students who follow the course asynchronously as they cannot attend the course when it is offered because of professional or personal constraints. Our study consists of observing attendance at all distance education courses offered in the synchronous mode by the Computer Science and Software Engineering Department at Laval University during 10 consecutive semesters. The aim is to identify factors that influence students in their choice of attending the distance courses in synchronous mode. It was found that participation tends to be relatively stable over the years for any one semester (fall, winter summer) and is similar from one course to another, although students may be increasingly familiar with the synchronous distance education courses. Average participation is around 28%. There may be deviations, but they concern only a few courses during certain semesters, suggesting that these deviations would only have occurred because of the composition of particular promotions during specific semesters. Furthermore, course schedules have a great influence on the attendance rate. The highest rates are all for courses which are scheduled outside office hours.
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