A Co-operative Partnership in the Education of University Teachers

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In this paper we address experiences in an international collaboration in the design and development of an educational programme in teaching and learning in higher education. The programme is designed for university staff teaching in a range of disciplines areas. It is intended to provide an introduction to university teaching to academic staff that lack qualifications or experience in teaching. It is also designed to enhance the teaching of reflective practitioners who have prior experience. The paper focuses on the experiences of working collaboratively in this venture across national boundaries. Universities, like other enterprises, operate in an increasingly competitive global environment. This does not mean that they necessarily operate as isolated entities in all of their activities. There are strategic advantages in operating collaboratively. As for a business enterprise, operating collaboratively can broaden the resources available for conducting an activity, generate economies of scale, and widen markets. In this case, collaboration in design of the programme also gives those academics who undertake it a claim to recognition of their qualification beyond national boundaries. In the paper we outline the original rationale for working collaboratively, identify issues that arose in the process, and evaluate the current arrangement.

The topic

In this paper we describe and critique collaboration between Napier University, Edinburgh and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne in the development of a dual-badged Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for offer at the two universities and at other locations. Napier University developed and accredited the Postgraduate Certificate programme, which was designed as a credit-rated component of academic staff development, and has offered it across Scotland for a number of years. The course is accredited and is recognized in the UK by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) and the National Board for Nursing, Midwifery & Health Visiting for Scotland (NBS). The programme was modified for online delivery by Swinburne University of Technology. The programme as originally developed was in flexible form – having online, print and reference components and allowing participants to enrol and finish at times which suit them. While no fixed time attendance is required apart from two two-day sessions, the programme does involve individual face-to-face sessions with a tutor and tutor observation of teaching. Additionally 15 work-based assignments and accompanying reflection build into a portfolio of evidence of learning. The online version allows for electronic submission, marking and return of the majority of these.

The online version allows the programme to be offered remote from the awarding campus. The modified programme was introduced at Swinburne in the second semester of 2002. There were anticipated benefits for the partners. For Napier University it was anticipated that the
online programme would provide the opportunity to market the programme beyond Scotland. For Swinburne University it provides the opportunity to adopt a programme accredited and recognized outside of Australia.

**Context**

In the ‘Western’ world change and pace of change have altered the way in which work is undertaken and the work of academics is no exception. It involves everything from physically teaching on campuses in other countries, to collaborative research, development and teaching across national boundaries, and conducting ‘virtual’ classes with students in a variety of locations. It involves catering for a growing demand for higher education with a changing cross-cultural clientele (Tierney 1999, Katz 1999, Thomas 1995) at a time in which public financial support has been constrained and universities are taking on the corporate characteristics of large multi-national organizations. As universities seek to respond to new possibilities for their operations opened up by technological developments, react to competition and adjust to changes in available financial resources, they redefine their mission, revise their strategies and restructure their operations, setting in place revisions and reviews before changes cycle through.

Tensions in the context of university operations are bound to generate contesting approaches to the teaching component of academic work. On the one hand many teachers still stand lecturing to a roomful of students on a weekly basis in a semester length course. On the other hand the virtual classroom, the video-connected remote classroom, and the podcast lecture are with us. The use of online course materials and online communications and assessment systems to support or replace classroom teaching is becoming common place. There is a push for flexible approaches to provision of higher education which offer choice to learners about the time, place and pace of their learning, about content, and about entry and exit points. We are generating client-oriented systems employing electronic warehouses of meta-data tagged learning objects retrievable on a just-in-time basis to satisfy the ever-changing lifelong learning needs of the individual. Academic input is one component in facilitating learning transactions but it is accompanied by instructional design, multi-media programming, information and content management systems, corporate planning and resource allocation, and client liaison and marketing services (Inglis, Ling and Joosten, 2002). In this context determining appropriate approaches to the development of university teaching is problematic, sharing those approaches across universities is even more so. In pursuit of ‘identite terrienne’, however, Napier University and Swinburne University believe it should be attempted.

**Challenges**

In many cases the strategy of universities for responding to the new environment has been ‘to collaborate or form strategic alliances’ (Nelson, 2002). This collaboration, as in the case discussed here, is often with complementary international universities, such as occurs through the ‘Universitas 21’ network, rather than with local competitors.

Any collaborative arrangement is bound to involve some challenges in reaching a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the partners. Collaboration which crosses national boundaries and which deals with aspects of organizational development generates particular contestations. Collaborating in the offering of a formal award programme in teaching and learning in higher education raises issues arising from:

- The compatibility of the collaborating organizations
- The staff development needs of the organizations in a rapidly changing environment
The international nature of the collaboration
The understandings of learning and teaching to be employed
The compatibility of frameworks surrounding assessment
The need in educational development to adopt exemplary techniques including exemplary use of information and communication technologies
Quality assurance and accreditation requirements.

Distinctions between different providers of higher education have blurred over the past decade or so both because more institutions have been styled as universities and because distinctions between campus based and distance provision have diminished with the incursion of ICT into learning and teaching activities in general. There are, however, calls for a clearer distinction between institutions. Sir John Daniel, formerly Vice Chancellor of the U.K. Open University, claims there is a critical need for players in the field to determine just what type of university they wish to be (2000) and Brendan Nelson, the past Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training proposes Higher Education states that institutions should not aspire to the same purpose, goals or organizational structure (Nelson, 2002). The present Minister also suggests that ‘for our universities to remain competitive and attract students from both Australia and overseas they must embrace greater diversity’ (Bishop 2006). If collaborating universities redefine their roles their staff development requirements may differ. Organic change during collaboration must be expected.

One organizational response to the rapidly changing environment is to provide for staff development on a strategic ‘just-in-time’ basis. This raises questions about the suitability of a formal award programme as a means of fulfilling the staff development needs of the organization and the suitability of a formally structured programme in an institution which espouses flexible responses to learning needs. Organizational and institutional suitability may not accord with suitability for individuals hence Nelson has suggested that typically tight structure of course requirements could be modularized and offered through different providers to meet the needs of the individual (Nelson, 2002). If staff development arrangements are to model flexible approaches to the provision of education, the structure of staff development programmes needs to be considered. Within the UK the issue is further complicated by an emerging debate about level and depth of credit-rated staff development provision. Deconstruction, reconstruction and ‘just-in-time’ should not lessen the challenge for participants in programmes. The current Minister for Education, Science and Training in Australia has observed that some Australian universities ‘have introduced a requirement for teaching staff to gain teaching qualifications and that this ‘will undoubtedly improve teachers’ competence and professionalism and have a positive impact on student learning’ (Bishop 2006)

Collaboration on an international basis in the design of a programme requires avoidance of the parochial yet the maintenance of local relevance. In requiring avoidance of the colloquial even spelling can be an issue and pictorial representation can be unexpectedly exclusive.

Preferred theories of learning may vary between providers, as well as between participants, due in part to varying the cultural contexts. Whilst a programme focusing on learning and teaching in higher education may well encourage participants to explore and evaluate a variety of theories of learning and teaching the programme itself will explicitly or implicitly be based on one or more select theories. There is a need at the least to be clear about differences in understandings between the providers and to build the partnership with either harmonization or contestation in mind.
As for any programme of educational development there is an expectation exemplary techniques, including exemplary use of information and communication technologies, will be adopted. Defining exemplary, even good, practice in a rapidly changing educational environment is problematic. Designers and facilitators of the programme like the participants are on a learning curve as new techniques and technologies emerge. What are seen as appropriate responses may vary between countries. The delivery team must build shared understandings.

Quality assurance and accreditation requirements also vary between countries. In this case the aim was to internationalize the programme and offer an online version without jeopardizing existing university, professional and national accreditation. At the same time the programme needed to meet a new set of institutional accreditation requirements. Extant recognizing professional bodies needed to be informed of developments and implications.

The approach adopted

The agreement
Napier University and Swinburne University signed a Memorandum of Agreement with respect to the development of an online version of the Napier University’s Post-Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and its further development to meet the needs of an international market. The vision was for a programme that would be jointly badged as a qualification recognized by both Napier and Swinburne Universities. A joint development team would advise on content, style and format of the course. Copyright would be held jointly. The agreement related to the redevelopment of the programme and its accreditation. It was recognized and stated that further agreement would be required on its delivery. Additionally it was acknowledged that negotiation would be required with professional, national and international associations.

The extent of modifications to the programme
The programme was accredited by Napier University and was recognized in the UK by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) and the National Board for Nursing, Midwifery & Health Visiting for Scotland (NBS). Maintaining these recognitions, or their equivalent, is critical to the collaborative agreement. In regard to this, four aspects of the collaboration therefore needed careful handling: the internationalization of the content; the preparation of a fully online version of the course; accreditation of the course by Swinburne University and continued good standing with the recognizing bodies.

Thus the programme aims and objectives, intended learning outcomes and underpinning values have not been altered. The four-module structure of the programme has been maintained along with the broad topics addressed, process of reflection and assignments of each module.

Adapting the course to an online environment was assisted by the substantial use of online resources in the existing Napier University programme and the fact that the programme was flexibly paced requiring limited attendance. To date the task has been in part one of updating and extending materials and using Swinburne University’s access to graphic design and computer programming to introduce more interactive elements. In future the task will include shared understandings between tutors, across markers, between examination boards and between UK external examiners and Australian evaluators.
Four elements of the Napier programme – a two-part intensive course induction conducted over a few days, aspects of interaction with an assigned tutor, interactions with a discipline-based mentor and regular ‘study-in days’ at the Education Development Services – require attendance. Adopting distance education techniques, the revised online course induction is provided in several time slots and involves synchronous text, sound, or video communication between participants, the programme leader and programme tutors. Participants are assigned to study groups and with several induction tasks to complete through face-to-face, synchronous or asynchronous communications. Face-to-face tutoring is offered where it is convenient. Otherwise it is replaced with online tutoring and debriefing following some specified teaching activities in place of direct observations of these activities. The online version of the programme maintains a discipline-based mentor component whereby a local subject specialist plays an active facilitative role. ‘Study-in days’ are replaced by the allocation of study time through negotiation between the participant, the assigned tutor and the participant’s supervisor or line manager. During this time regular synchronous text, sound, or video communication between participants and the participant and the assigned tutor will occur.

The approach to internationalization
At the outset it was agreed that the course should be internationalized rather than bi-nationalized. Existing resources and links were not removed but were supplemented with materials from a variety of contexts predominantly from Australia, Asia and the U.S.A. This approach, which still provides access to local material, was not expected to trouble accrediting bodies. It was regarded instead as evidencing the currency of content and signaling the importance attached to catering for a diversity of participants in the desired global context.

Trialing and evaluation arrangements
Swinburne University had produced previously an online, updated and internationalized version of a single subject offered by Napier University entitled Teaching with Learning Technology. The subject is not part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education but was used to pilot the two universities’ ability to collaborate and troubleshoot. The subject ran through the first semester of 2002. One of the Napier University staff led the subject and one of the Swinburne Education Development Advisers acted as an online tutor for it. The experience in modifying course content, adding some interactive materials, internationalizing reference materials and links, and tutoring online was then used to inform approaches to the modules of the postgraduate certificate and to inform refinements in assessment. The ‘online’ postgraduate certificate programme was launched at Swinburne University of Technology in July 2002.

Reflections on the experience to date
The course is derived from Napier University. Both Napier University and Swinburne University staff had some concerns that the course structure and the approaches to learning and teaching employed might not have been those chosen to be employed if Swinburne had started with a clean slate. The structure of the course, however, is similar to structures adopted in a number of Australian universities and did not present a difficulty. The structure had also been operated flexibly over distance, albeit not wholly online.

Difficulties arising from differences in theoretical understandings of learning and teaching were not significant. Some of the theoretical material referred to in the course is classic
learning theory, not usually applied to higher education in Australia though still transferable for staff creating their personal parameters. This material is complemented with understandings which are favored at Swinburne University. For the most part there is a coincidence of preferred theorists, unsurprising for two universities with not dissimilar origins.

The updating, supplementation and internationalization of material was not in itself problematic. It just took academic staff time and media staff time and other resources. The process of conversion did indeed take longer than expected with the result that only the first modules will be available when the trial is launched in July 2002. The remaining modules were made available in time for 2003, ahead of participant need.

Protecting existing Napier University accreditation and U.K. recognition may constrain the ability to respond to the accreditation requirements of Swinburne University. As a university of technology Swinburne University accreditation procedures require the establishment of a course advisory committee with interested parties represented which usually includes employers in the industry and graduates employed in the field. The advisory committee is normally influential in the development of the course from the concept stage to the accreditation stage. In this case an advisory committee was formed for the Swinburne programme with two members from local universities in Australia, one from interstate, one from Oxford University in the UK and two from Napier University. Meetings are conducted by video conference.

Conclusions

A number of challenges were identified. After 3 years of operation of the programme it is possible to make some observations.

- **The compatibility of the collaborating organizations.** The universities have some similarity in size and the fact that they have a vocational orientation in their programmes. However the post-graduate certificate programme at Napier University enrols 3 times the number of participants as Swinburne University. Napier also offers progression to a Master level programme not offered at Swinburne.

- **The staff development needs of the organizations in a rapidly changing environment.** Swinburne University had an urgent need to provide a brief introductory programme for academic staff new to teaching. A single unit programme – styled a ‘Professional Certificate’ was devised and ran concurrently with the post-graduate certificate. The professional certificate emphasised observed teaching sessions with feedback from discipline based mentors and development of a reflective portfolio. The post-graduate certificate also involved observed teaching session but not in the first unit – which provided much of the theoretical underpinning for the programme. It involved a reflective portfolio, but one built up over the four units of the course. Running both programmes was seen as un tenable. Compromises were made on both sides and two observed teaching sessions were introduced to the first unit of the post-graduate certificate programme. The content covered over the first two units of the post-graduate certificate remained similar to the Napier original but the distribution of content between the units now differs. This is an indication that local needs may differ over time and the programmes may drift apart.

- **The international nature of the collaboration.** The international nature of the collaboration has not proved to be an impediment. Both institutions are used to working beyond national boundaries. National quality assurance and accountability measures differ in detail but not in substance. Time differences are awkward for video meetings but can be managed. However, some of the hopes of working jointly to offer the programme internationally – beyond Australia and the UK have not materialised.
The understandings of learning and teaching to be employed. Within institutions staff turnover can lead to revision of curriculum to meet preferences in theoretical underpinnings and in teaching strategies employed. There was some tension in the first instance between the teaching strategies and organisation of topics and content preferred by Swinburne staff and the materials and approach received from Napier. Over time, with staff changes in both institutions there is has been some drift between the programmes as each have been modified by new staff.

The compatibility of frameworks surrounding assessment. Assessment requirements were originally closely aligned but detailed arrangements for assessment have changed over time and now differ between the institutions.

The need in educational development to adopt exemplary techniques including exemplary use of information and communication technologies. Arrangements for professional development of staff teaching on the programmes are handled locally and are likely to differ between the institutions.

Quality assurance and accreditation requirements. Quality assurance and accreditation requirements differ between the institutions and are influenced by the differing national systems.

Since the initial arrangement for Swinburne to develop online materials to support the programme in the two universities the universities have adopted different learning management systems. The Swinburne materials were developed using Blackboard. Napier University has adopted WebCT. This prevented a simple sharing of materials and has probably been a factor in the differentiation of the programmes over time.

A willingness to co-operate is maintained on both sides. Napier University is represented on the programme advisory board for the Post-graduate Certificate offered at Swinburne University. At least some members of staff from the two programmes have met each year through attendance at international conferences or through overseas visits. Nevertheless responses to local demands, including the preferences of staff teaching on the programmes and participants in the programmes, and use of local technologies has led to some divergence. An imperative to maintain the partnership appears to be lacking.

References