

OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT: OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

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Abstract

International partnerships in the higher education sector need to be viewed against a contemporary backdrop of rapid technological advance, knowledge-based global economic developments and the opening up of the education market to international competition – notably through implementation of the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which includes education.

In order to explore the underlying issues involved in international collaborations, the quality of their procedures and end-products, this paper concentrates on a single aspect: Collaborative arrangements between universities. In particular, it focuses on cross-cultural partnerships among universities in Europe, drawing on projects sponsored by the European Union since the early 1990s. It discusses both the advantages and the challenges and pitfalls involved in academics from different European countries collaboratively constructing and presenting courses in Humanities, Cultural Sciences and Business Studies for the benefit of their students. Latterly, such joint courses have relied mainly on electronic forms of teaching and study, which raises further questions about the utilisation of the Web as an educational resource and uses of computer conferencing as a communication tool within such networking arrangements.

Introduction

Globalisation and GATS

In the contemporary context, international collaboration to produce higher education courses must take account of the trend towards a globalisation of higher education as represented by the GATS agreement (the 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services). The Agreement is operated by the World Trade Organisation (under the auspices of the UN), the 145 member countries of which account for 97 per cent of world trade:

GATS is the first multi-national agreement [between member countries] to provide legally enforceable rights to trade in all services. It has a built-in commitment to continuous liberalization through periodic negotiations. And it is the world's first multinational agreement on investment, since it covers not just cross-border trade but every possible means of supplying a service, including the right to set up a commercial presence in the export market. (World Trade Organisation Secretariat, 2002)

While we may all be familiar with the notion of liberalisation and globalisation in trade, these ideas are fairly new as applied to services. Education is among the services concerned. And, according to Hawkrige (2005, p.7), "In the medium- to long-term, GATS has serious organisational, cultural, legal, political and economic implications for...education".

Under the Agreement, countries are expected to file requests for liberalisation of services in other countries and also to offer to liberalise their own services. So far, the USA has requested access to higher education, adult education, training and educational testing services in all countries, and, along with Australia and New Zealand, is pressing for full liberalisation of the education market. Canada and the UK, however, have declared that they are not offering access to their publicly-funded education services. As yet many countries have not made their position on GATS known, though they

will have to before long. And the stakes are extremely high for countries that export education (that is, the richer western countries): in 2000, for example, exports of educational services were worth over \$10 billion to the USA, \$3.7 billion to the UK, \$2.1 billion to Australia and \$0.8 billion to Canada (Larsen et al., 2002). These countries are no doubt planning to reap far greater rewards once the Agreement is fully underway.

An internationalisation of higher education, then, seems inevitable and is indeed already underway. We may assume that this is likely to be most pronounced in distance education, in which collaboration with other providers can be expected to yield greater economies of scale – and it is, of course, predicated on extensive use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). When an institution has these technologies at its disposal and can apply them effectively it is possible to attract and educate students from locations anywhere in the world, provided the necessary technology is available or can be made available there, without the trouble and expense of setting up satellite campuses in those locations. As Hawkrige (2005, p.2) remarks:

Proponents [of globalisation] see knowledge as a commodity and education as a service, to be traded globally, and students everywhere as customers whose needs can and must be met through globalisation, which is a creative gale.

They would claim some positive advantages for it: enrichment of the curriculum, wide provision of high-quality courses, and scarce staff expertise made available to students in many countries. Perhaps some of these considerations underlie MIT's decision to make its 'courseware' freely available (OpenCourseWare at MIT (US): <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html>). But globalisation of higher education has many detractors too, who see it as more of a destructive than a creative force.

Some regard cognition in e-learning as different from that in embodied forms of education, and inferior to it (see Dreyfus, 2001, and also critique of his argument in Blake, 2002). Others fear that global education will tend to impose common curricula, teaching-learning methods and indeed the English language, so ultimately reducing cultural diversity (see Ess, 2001; Chambers, 2002; Mayor and Swann, 2002). Furthermore, global education is seen as incompatible with social objectives in many countries (Stromquist and Monkman, 2000): "nowhere are the poor able to benefit from services they cannot pay for" (Hawkrige, 2005, p.2). Finally, the 'nightmare scenario' of a takeover of higher education by private companies is said to threaten us all: corporations such as Microsoft, publishers like McGraw-Hill and Pearson, and private for-profit universities.

Underlying Principles of Collaboration

Certainly, it may be prudent for distance educators to explore the possibilities for wide collaboration. Meantime, it will be to their advantage to consider some of the issues surrounding international collaboration within the university sector, to which the GATS agreement lends considerable urgency. This paper focuses on co-operation between universities in Europe and draws on some of the collaborative projects undertaken by member countries of the European Union (EU) from the mid 1990s, necessarily selectively.

The paper draws on three projects funded in EU (Socrates and Minerva) programmes. Although, as we shall see, these projects differ in important respects, they share a basic philosophical underpinning. Put simply, the belief is that genuine collaboration depends upon the development of projects from the 'bottom up'. For successful joint enterprises, professional educators in different universities and countries must want to collaborate together; they cannot be yoked together by policy or by fiat imposed from on high. They must see certain advantages in co-operation, for themselves and their institutions, and they must feel that they 'own' both the process and its outcomes. In short, the collaboration must *work* for all of them. Otherwise their contributions to a project will be half-hearted at best, and there will be little possibility of changing practice or sustaining innovation in their institutions. But of course a statement of such underlying principle is just a start; the hard thing is to

translate it into practice. How can ‘bottom up’ collaborations be formed and maintained, how can ownership of a project be shared and how can it be made to work to the benefit of all concerned?

Some European Collaborative Projects

In 1994 a course in European Studies, entitled ‘What is Europe?’ (WiE?), had been prepared jointly by colleagues in several institutions and countries under the auspices of the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities, and was first presented in the partner institutions. It was a text-based course, which had taken over four years and expensive resources to prepare, but some of its features were nevertheless to become the model for a number of more modest, web-based teaching experiments in the following decade. These initiatives were prompted by the EU Socrates programme, launched in 1995 to contribute to “the understanding of the cultural, artistic, political, economic and social characteristics of the other Member States” (Official Journal of the European Communities, 1994). In 1996 some of the collaborators who had combined forces to produce WiE? entered into partnership in the project ‘Creating a European Forum for European Studies’ (CEFES, 1997-2000), along with new partners. In this project, students in Europe would exchange views in virtual seminars (computer conferences) which were to be additional, enriching elements in their undergraduate education; that is, additional to their home-based courses, and unassessed. CEFES took as its theme ‘European Identity’ and, over two years, enabled some 200 students from different European institutions and countries to engage in discussion of the issues in virtual seminars, guided by tutors, on a voluntary basis. Some of these universities were dedicated to distance education (single mode, such as the Universidade Aberta, Portugal, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain, and the UK Open University), two others were dual-mode (campus-based and distance education, the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and Universität Lüneberg, Germany) and one was a fully campus-based institution (University of Surry, UK); the project was co-ordinated by the Deutsches Institut für Fernstudienforschung, a German research institute. Each institution of course had its own, existing methods of developing courses and supporting its students.

Already we see here some answers to our questions. It helps greatly if at least some of the participants in a collaborative project are already known to one other; they have worked together in some capacity before, and have established good working relationships and feelings of friendship and trust. It should also be clear that in order for these different types of university to own and derive benefit from the project – for the partnership to be maintained successfully - project arrangements have to be flexible. And as far as possible they should be grounded in institutional realities, reflecting the experiences of real students following particular courses, rather than ‘experiments’; academic seminars are traditionally vehicles for knowledge exchange in European universities, so virtual seminars work with the grain of established practice. Finally, the exchange of views among students in the seminars needs to be meaningful. Raybourn et al. (2003, p.98) sum up:

Lessons learned from face-to-face communication tell us that the quality of successful collaborations depends largely on sharing cultural and contextual information [Rogers, 1995]. Cultural information shared by collaborative organisations or communities of practice [Wenger, 1998] includes the assumptions, values, goals, meanings, and histories shared, negotiated and co-created by its members. Intercultural communication is the exchange of this information and the co-creation of meaning between individuals or among groups (teams, organisations, etc.) that perceive themselves to be different. As our organisations become more diverse, the challenge of intercultural communication is heightened.

CEFES

Drawing on the experience of WiE?, the CEFES team set out to do three things: together to develop a curriculum for a ‘course’ in European Studies that could be integrated into the regular programmes of all the participating universities; to run virtual seminars on the topics of the course, with occasional invited guest ‘speakers’; and to train lecturer-tutors to improve their technical skills and their ability to teach cross-culturally (which is not discussed in this paper, but on this and other CEFES-related

matters see Baumeister et al., 2001). There were three modules, or 'sequences', in the course: The Identity of Europe: A historical phenomenon; The Europe of Identities: A political phenomenon; Globalisation: Implications for European identity. Each was of eight weeks' duration, involving a three-week preparatory period, a four week International Forum (a computer conference, or virtual seminar), and an evaluation period. Each had a co-constructed syllabus, consisting of themes, key questions, tasks, and readings, to be studied during the preparatory period and subsequently discussed in the International forum, in English. The sequences could be studied independently (one or more), as in the first year of the project, or all three sequences could be studied one after the other to form a coherent course, as in the project's second year. First-year practice turned out to be the more successful. European countries have different start dates for academic terms/semesters, different holidays, festivals, etc., and trying to find three blocks of eight weeks during which all the students could participate was extremely difficult. In the second year of the project student participation tended to fall away as the course progressed, mainly owing to practical difficulties of this kind. Clearly, offering 'bite-sized' elements, and choice, are important aspects of structural flexibility.

Crucially, however, the collaboration was maintained successfully and integration of CEFES in the universities' regular programmes was achieved by adoption of a decentralised teaching model. The partners constructed the syllabus for each sequence collaboratively – two institutions, in different countries, took the lead each time, and the outcome was discussed and agreed by all the partners before being implemented. But when it came to the relationship between the CEFES sequence and the institution's regular courses, each university made its own adaptation. Thus Surrey, as a campus-based university, held related face-to-face seminars during the preparatory period and thereafter; just a few of the Surrey students would actually participate in the International forum discussions at any one time, representing the views of their peers. Meanwhile, the Universidade Aberta established a 'national conference' (later taken up by other universities) in which the distance students first discussed the readings set in the syllabus in their own language, thus establishing a surer understanding of the issues before beginning to contribute to the International forum. In fact, as an aid to inclusiveness, what became known as a 'representative speaker' convention became established in the project as a whole. This allowed any student group to nominate a few of its number to contribute to the International forum on its behalf, thus sheltering those who felt unsure about their ability to write in English, or just very unconfident to 'speak', while enabling them to follow the discussions. The fact that the distance students were usually obliged to operate as individuals made no difference – decentralisation meant that each university was free to make whatever teaching arrangements suited it and its students' best. Thus, everyone could choose to study the CEFES sequence(s) that were of most relevance to their programme of European Studies, and do so in ways that best chimed with their circumstances and met their needs.

Inclusiveness and equal ownership of the project were also enhanced by the way in which the International Forum was designed to operate. Each virtual seminar was moderated by (at least) two tutors from different institutions and countries, so that by the end of the series each national partner-institution had taken its turn to lead a conference in co-operation with at least one other. This ensured negotiation and some accommodation between different academic traditions of teaching European Studies within Europe, and allowed a range of debating styles to be represented in the discussions (for the different orientations to study across Europe, see Teichler and Maiworm, 1997). Consequently, no single conception of 'European Studies' would predominate in the discussions and no one culture's perceptions of, for instance, aspects of the past or the implications of globalisation would prevail. But, primarily, the moderators' job was to help students *learn* through and from the process of cross-cultural exchange; the aim of the virtual seminars was a genuine exchange of views across borders - a co-creation of knowledge and understanding, such that a 'third culture' might emerge online. Raybourn et al. (2003, p.106) describe this process:

A 'third culture' is what is created from an intercultural interaction when persons from different cultures communicate equitably and with respect for the other such that the emergent culture reflects appropriate input from each interlocutor. A third culture is the co-creation of meaning in which all interlocutors are participants as well as co-owners. In effect, together

users co-create a 'third culture' that is neither one nor the other, but a combination of the two, or three, and so on.

In this connection, teachers whose first language is not English are especially sympathetic to students' attempts to express themselves in a second (or third) language – better able to read between the lines, looking beyond non-standard locutions, grammatical errors and the like, to the core of their meaning – and also sensitive to the students' needs for further explanation and guidance from time to time. This strategy ensured that one such teacher was involved in every conference.

Dec. Knowl

Many of the 'bottom up' characteristics of the CEFES project were reproduced in the project 'Decentralised Knowledge – Networked Resource-based Learning' (Dec.Knowl, 2002-04), notably the decentralised teaching model, the operations of the virtual seminar and the tutor training programme. However, there were major differences too. In the first place, this project involved collaboration among colleagues in Business Studies, all of whom had been known to each other for some time through membership of an international consortium of Business Schools (the Universities of Reutlingen, Reims, Madrid, Lancaster and Dublin City), including a university in the USA. Second, in addition to constructing a syllabus for the virtual seminar, on aspects of Globalisation, the participating institutions were to construct a Knowledge Base in International Business Studies. This was to be a wide-ranging resource, including lecture notes, web links to resources and readings, etc., which it was hoped would make the process of curriculum development more collaborative and exploratory. Third, the students in Dec.Knowl were offered accreditation for their involvement in the virtual seminar preparatory work and/or the seminar itself.

As regards personnel, we again see at work the principle of building on previous partnerships, of constructing the collaboration on the basis of knowledge and trust. Even so, this partnership was strained by the aim to construct the shared disciplinary Knowledge Base (KB) since, among other matters, it raised the question of property rights. The partners were reluctant simply to 'donate' their curriculum designs and lecture notes, or the fruits of their own research in the form of bibliographies and web links, which in higher education are traditionally regarded as institutionally owned or as their personal property (see Johnes, 2004, for the background to these issues). There was also the difficulty of deciding on the right kind of technical platform for the KB, and appropriate metadata for the Knowledge Objects it contained such that it could be searched (Rae, 2004). The upshot was that the conception of the nature and purposes of the KB changed over the course of the project, from a knowledge repository – a content-oriented academic resource - largely for use by course designers in International Studies, to a constantly evolving resource on Globalisation for use by students during the virtual seminar, to which they too could contribute. That is, the conception changed from a relatively static structure to a dynamic student-centred process.

In short, the project made the important discovery that there are limits to collaboration, even among colleagues/institutions known to each other. There was little support for the idea of sharing management structures, such as curriculum designs, and resources, and much more enthusiasm for sharing pedagogical ideas and strategies. For a number of reasons, the notion of a 'community of experts' freely sharing their expert knowledge did not take root.

As regards accreditation, widely known to be important for students' motivation to participate in online discussions (McConnell, 1999; Salmon, 2000), the Dec.Knowl team made it work for all the partners by adopting a decentralised approach - just as they had for teaching in this and the earlier project. Rather than trying to reach agreement about accreditation across the partnership – a particularly sensitive matter for the different institutions – the project left the various partners free to make their own arrangements: "This way each of the partners could harmonise the online seminars within their own standard teaching provision and offer credit according to their own internal procedures" (Wetzel, 2004, p.59). For example, at Lancaster students were asked to submit an essay based on the discussions experienced in the virtual seminar, which was worth one-third of the marks

in a UK 15-credit course (or, around 30 ECTS points). At Reutlingen, as well as writing an essay the students' written contributions to the seminar itself were assessed, together worth up to 50% of the end-of-course grade. At Reims, students joining the seminar from one programme were assessed – worth one credit towards the final degree – while those from another programme were not.

The project also aimed to be sustainable, able to integrate e-learning into the participating universities' regular programmes of study. In this respect the outcome was mixed. Those elements closest to the working lives of the academics concerned were the most successful: the study programme (preparatory work package), the virtual seminars, and tutor training. Although the partners have run further seminars beyond the life of the project, and new members have joined the partnership, we have seen that the most ambitious element of the programme - constructing the shared Knowledge Base - was problematic. Making the original KB conception successful would require the input of considerable resource along with changes in institutional culture. In particular, the evaluators concluded, it would require informed leadership – support for collaborative e-learning from influential people at a high level in the universities.

RESULTS

The RESULTS project (The Role of Universities in Regional Economic Development), which is ongoing, in particular aims to tackle this issue of 'buy in' to e-learning by senior staff of the participating universities, as leaders of their research communities. Instead of recruiting undergraduate student participation it aims to enrol Masters and research students, and their supervisors, in order for innovation to become embedded at higher levels in the institutions. Another major difference between this project and the earlier ones is that the focus of RESULTS is collaborative work among the students, linked to an assessed piece of work. The work package sets up a number of topics, which the students may choose to tackle in international sub-groups of four or five. Each sub-group researches the chosen topic, in ways agreed among them, for a period of four weeks. Subsequently, the students individually prepare an assignment in draft form, which is posted in a whole-group Open Forum. Following discussions in the Forum, each assignment is re-drafted and submitted for marking to the students' own (home) supervisor – who grades the work in accordance with the rules that normally apply within that institution. In due course, the assignments (plus references and supporting materials) are to be lodged in a Knowledge Base which will serve as an ongoing teaching and research resource for the partner institutions.

The project has not reported yet, but its aims are clear. We can expect some illuminating findings regarding the workings of literature-led trans-national study groups, as well as the extent to which the strategy to involve more influential partners helps to 'mainstream' and sustain e-learning programmes in the universities.

Conclusion: Characteristics of Sustainable Collaboration

As we have seen from the chosen examples, during approximately a decade of European experimentation the emphasis has shifted from how to forge partnerships between universities that promote meaningful learning opportunities for all their students (how to mount and run successful virtual seminars, how to integrate assessment of the outcomes in ways that accommodate the different European assessment regimes, how to train teachers effectively) to consideration of the ways in which international e-learning programmes may become embedded in the partner institutions – no longer experiments, but established aspects of university education in Europe for undergraduate and graduate students alike. Such sustainability is among the most pressing and intractable challenges still facing us. And it is clear that it will be achieved only by involving senior staff of the universities in e-learning projects, and convincing them of their value.

But this is still not enough. Drawing on evaluation of the Dec.Knowl project, Baumeister and Wilson (2004, pp.74-5) list all the factors that must be present for successful mainstreaming of e-learning in the university, as follows:

- support for e-learning by influential people at a high level in the university
- commitment to e-learning by key staff at departmental/faculty level
- reasonable content area, where e-learning makes sense
- some resident experts in e-learning (both technical and pedagogic aspects), to advise and provide staff training
- planned, specific e-learning projects, along with adequate funding to support them and enthusiastic staff members to execute them
- evaluation of the projects, with the processes and outcomes disseminated widely in the university (and beyond) and fed into e-learning policy development.

Arguably, universities need to experiment among themselves, and to understand e-learning processes at every level and in all respects *before* they consider entering into the wider forms of collaboration referred to at the start of this paper – with global corporations, publishers, etc. For only then will the universities be in a good position to know what they want from such collaborations, and to ensure that they work well from their own, and their students', points of view.

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