Effective Partnerships in Open Distance Learning: Implications of the Irish National Distance Education Centre Model

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Abstract

The National Distance Education Centre in Ireland has adopted a cooperative and collaborative approach in meeting its primary aim of extending access to qualifications and training throughout Ireland to those who are unable to attend full-time education because of work, location, disability, or domestic reasons. This paper analyses the conditions which determine the effectiveness of partnerships and networks in the context of this experience. The paper will consider the challenges and opportunities facing cooperative national distance education systems in the context of new technologies, globalisation, and converging markets.

Introduction

Davies (1997) notes that inter-institutional alliances are increasingly likely to be of substantial importance in promoting institutional change and development, penetrating new markets, developing interdisciplinary connections, and providing a coherent and regional and international service. This paper will address Davies's call for analysis of the conditions likely to determine the effectiveness of partnerships and networks. The paper starts with an outline of the factors promoting cooperation and collaboration followed by an analysis of the factors promoting the success or failure of cooperative initiatives. The background of the National Distance Education Centre (NDEC), which is now the hub of a collaborative network involving most of the higher education institutions in Ireland will be outlined before comparing the outcomes of two collaborative ventures in which NDEC has participated. The data for this analysis are drawn from reports and documents both published and unpublished, and from the author's involvement as a member of staff in the Centre in a number of collaborative programmes described in this paper.

Cooperation in distance higher education

The issue of cooperation in higher education has been debated for many years. According to the literature the stimulus for cooperation arises mainly from concerns

with resource utilisation, political goals, improvements in quality and/or technological imperatives. Among the financial benefits cited are the more effective use of scarce resources (Davies 1997; Konrad and Small, 1986); reduction of costs through elimination of duplication (Konrad and Small 1988) or the division of labour where some institutions prepare course materials while others provide student support (Curran, 1992); or the development of strategic alliances of competitors to create access to wider markets through pooling resources or clustering expertise (Davies 1997; Moran and Mugridge 1993). Improvements in quality may be achieved through access to a wider range of academic expertise (Curran, 1992) or cross pollination of ideas for innovative programme development (Konrad and Small, 1986); the academic credibility of awards is enhanced by participation of a number of institutions (Curran, 1992, Konrad and Small 1986). Political considerations have also promoted cooperation, for example concerns with widening access to education (Curran, 1992) or expansion of opportunities for an ever increasing diversity of learners and communities (Konrad and Small, 1986,1988; Haughey and Fenwick, 1996); Davies (1997) has noted that governments are encouraging clusterings of regional networks. Finally, technological imperatives are cited as promoting cooperation (Konrad and Small 1986; Moran and Mugridge 1993; Bates 1997); whereas Daniel (1996) suggests that groups of institutions working together are in a position to bid for competitive pricing for new technologies. Nevertheless, while motives for cooperation may vary, Moran and Mugridge point out 'it would be intellectually satisfying, but illusory, to believe that inter-institutional collaboration is primarily driven by ideological commitment to improving educational access. The truth is resources – or lack of them – are the single most important source of pressure driving distance education and other higher education institutions into collaborative alliances' (Moran and Mugridge, 1993: 157).

Writing in 1985, Bynner (1985: 513) noted that the economic benefits of collaborative schemes and course transfer in distance education were clear but that 'examples of collaboration between distance education institutions are rare'. Examples of collaboration have indeed proliferated since then as the thirty seven papers on partnerships and alliances delivered at the ICDE conference in 1997 will attest (ICDE, 1997). Nevertheless, there are difficulties in maintaining successful partnerships. For example, Haughey and Fenwick (1996) document the establishment of five consortia in Alberta, of which three were still in existence at the time of the study. Two collaborative schemes started in Australia in 1983 have been well documented: the Inter-University Women's Studies Major has operated successfully (Moran, 1990), whereas the Toowoomba accord on course and credit transfer was 'moribund' by 1992. Dhanarajan and Timmers (1992) writing about distance learning in Hong Kong categorise collaboration in terms of levels of risk/benefit. Low risk activities (such as exchanging information or expertise, or providing advisers and consultancy) provide minimum benefits, but are more likely to succeed in that they reduce the risk to institutional autonomy, whereas high risk activities (such as collaborating on production or adaptation of course materials, cooperating on course development or developing a common open learning system) challenge autonomy and are therefore high risk, but potentially provide most benefits.

Distance Education in Ireland – the Cooperative Approach

The Irish distance education system has evolved to meet the needs of a small, peripheral economy with a relatively low population base (3.65m in 1995) and high unemployment (it should be noted that unemployment reduced considerably in the late 1990s although still relatively high at 9% in 1998). This has involved adopting a cost and educationally effective approach which seeks to maximise the use of existing resources and expertise in the academic system, and avoiding investment in either large scale infrastructural development, or in the proliferation of small scale initiatives.

The National Distance Education Centre was set up in 1982 at a time when the need for education and training, particularly in the then emerging information technology sector, was widely recognised. The Centre is formally a faculty of Dublin City University, but is funded separately by the Higher Education Authority, and operates a national role in developing and delivering distance education programmes in cooperation with the universities, educational institutions, professional bodies and a wide range of organisations.

The origins of the Centre lie in the establishment of the National Institute for Higher Education Dublin (NIHED, later Dublin City University) in 1975. Among the plans for the Institute, published in 1977 were a commitment to recurrent education and extension of access through the use of distance education. The Institute commissioned a report on models of distance education provision throughout the world; following its publication in 1979, a Steering Committee was set up under the Chair of the Chief Executive of RTE the state broadcasting agency with representatives from industry, government departments, higher education and training agencies, and RTE. The Committee reported in 1981. The Committee noted that it encountered enthusiastic support for the distance learning approach in its discussions with various groups and recommended that a 'Distance Education Unit' should be set up in NIHED, with an initial staff of three, to run two pilot programmes, in computing and agriculture. It was suggested that these pilot projects could test the viability of distance education in terms of enrolments and also the distribution network. It was also suggested that the use of bought in materials could speed up the establishment of the pilot projects. The publication of a government White Paper on education in 1980 which proposed the use of distance learning methods to increase computer literacy in Ireland was cited as a further endorsement of the concept of distance education.

The positions of Head of Distance Education and Lecturer/Researcher were advertised in June 1981, and the first members of staff took office in February 1982. The material which accompanied the advertisement indicated that the Unit was to operate in cooperation with a wide range of institutions and organisations. It stated that the initial concept of the Distance Education Unit was to comprise a small core staff – three initially – whose task it would be to draw together course development teams of subject specialists in order to develop particular programmes; these specialists would come from a variety of sources including industry, the public service, agriculture, business, the professions and other educational institutions. Links would be

established with education institutions on a regional basis. (By 1998, the core staff had grown to some eight academics, three administrators, twelve secretarial staff, a part-time staff of over three hundred located throughout Ireland, including subject leaders, tutors, course writers, editors, and study centre liaison officers.)

The new Distance Studies Unit moved quickly and by October 1992, a course on Basic programming was launched with the assistance of a grant of £90,000 from Guinness Ireland Ltd, and the gift £200,000 worth of equipment from Apple Computing. The core materials were bought in from the National Extension College in the UK, and a series of wraparound materials was prepared to cater for the different computer platforms in use. The programme was taken by over 2700 students throughout Ireland. Students could study at home, or use computers in a network of thirty three study centres, located in universities, regional technical colleges, schools, libraries, banks, industries and prisons. The evaluation of the programme noted that the pilot project had worked very well, the administrative system had coped with the numbers involved, the cooperation of the various institutions in providing study centre facilities had ensured success, and furthermore, the students on the programme indicated that there was a further demand for qualifications in the IT area.

By 1984, the Unit had been retitled the National Distance Education Centre. The position of the Centre as the hub of the national distance education system, based on cooperation between all institutions of education, was set out in a letter from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to the universities in July 1984. This letter acknowledged the existing cooperation from the institutions and announced that responsibility for the development of distance education in the state had been assigned to the National Distance Education Centre. All other institutions were requested in the interests of coordination on a national level of the development of distance education to consult with the Institute and the HEA on proposals and also requested them not to engage in development activities in this area involving expenditure without HEA approval (Hayden, 1984). Government support together with the direct grant (£226,000 in 1985, rising to over £500,000 in 1998) has allowed the Centre the freedom to develop programmes and to draw on the support of the system in the absence of competition from other providers and avoiding duplication of effort which has dogged systems in other countries. Despite reservations, usually expressed privately, that distance education was to be 'monopolised' by a single institution, the institutions have indeed cooperated generously, at all levels of the risk scale referred to above, ranging from provision of facilities in the form of tutorial rooms and examination centres, participation of staff on working groups and course teams, as subject leaders, course writers and tutors, to full participation in joint accreditation of programmes. Nor has the absence of state funding for distance education inhibited initiatives in distance education in the other institutions. A number of institutions have developed distance education programmes through cooperation with external bodies (eg, Credit Union studies in University College Cork with the League of Credit Unions; Training the Trainers with University College Galway and FAS the state training agency; banking in University College Dublin with the Institute of Banking; equine studies in the University of Limerick with the support of the horse industry).

The cooperative structure of distance education was strengthened when the Minister for Education launched the National Distance Education Council in September 1985. The role of the Council was seen as consultative; it would provide support and direction to the Centre in the development of a national distance education programme suited to national requirements. The Centre was to act effectively as the operational arm of Council. According to the Minister the objectives of Council were to: relieve growing pressure for places at third level; promote technological literacy; equalise opportunity for third level education; provide courses for adults in new skills and updating existing skills; and give opportunity for lifelong learning. The membership of Council included representatives from the universities, other educational institutions, research institutes, business, industry, training and trade unions. During its existence the Council was vital in initiating and supporting a range of collaborative programmes. However, Council has not met since completion of its second term of office in 1991. According to the Department of Education and the HEA, the matter of the composition of Council and its functions are under active consideration and it is intended to relaunch Council following these deliberations (personal communication, 1998).

Despite the effective absence of Council, the Centre has continued to develop programmes on a cooperative basis. In 1998, over 4000 students were enrolled on undergraduate, post-graduate and continuing professional education programmes in information technology, the humanities, nursing, business, and teacher training. The Centre started its credit programmes with the Bachelor of Science in Information Technology in 1986. The degree is accredited by Dublin City University, however the academic direction of the programme is carried out by leading academics in the other universities who participate by agreement with their home university. Course writers and tutors on the programme are also drawn from the other universities, and study centre facilities are provided to the programme, without charge, by the universities and Institutes of Technology. This model has been applied to subsequent programmes (for example a post graduate programme in Applications of Technology in Accounting, developed in cooperation with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland; a Masters in Management of Operations developed with the University of Ulster with funding under the Cross-Border Initiative; the Bachelor of Nursing Studies developed with An Bord Altranais – the Irish Nursing Board). In a further development of this model, the Bachelor of Arts – Humanities programme six universities jointly accredit the programme so that students study the same programme but will receive their degree from one of the participating universities.

The primary aim of the Centre is to extend access to qualifications and training throughout Ireland to those who are unable to attend full-time education because of work, location, disability, or domestic reasons. Its success in achieving this aim lies in the cooperative and collaborative approach adopted. The National Distance Education Centre model is now widely regarded as a cost-effective solution to the problem of developing a national system of distance education provision in a small economy (Curran, 1992).

Effective partnerships

This paper will define an effective partnership as one which meets its objectives and is sustainable within the parameters set by the partners. Before assessing whether partnerships have proved effective, it is helpful first to consider the origin of the partnership and the nature of the tasks involved: what were the factors involved in bringing often disparate groups together? A second order question then is what holds the partnership together? In this context it may be helpful to examine two partnerships in which the Centre was involved, both of which had the aim of extending access to education in Ireland. These were: the collaborative inter-university humanities degree programme, which continues to meet its objectives and which is widely regarded as a success; whereas the UK Open University/NDEC Facilitation Agreement, although ostensibly meeting its objectives, failed to survive and was terminated by one of the partners.

The need for a humanities programme was identified by Council, which set up an inter-university working group on in 1987. It was clear that no individual institution had the resources to launch a comprehensive programme in this area. The Working Group recommended in 1991 that a modular programme should be developed leading to the award of the Bachelor of Arts, to be accredited by one university. However, following eighteen months of intense discussion and many meetings, the universities agreed that accreditation should be non-exclusive and participative and that any university which wished to do so could accredit the degree. Finally, a formal agreement on operational procedures was negotiated, which covered such issues as validation procedures, modular structure, quality control and assurance, assessment, marks and standards, 'ownership of students', student support, management, and finance. One of the seven universities decided not to accredit the programme as it had just initiated a new part-time modular programme with which it considered there could be conflict, however this university agreed to participate in the programme by providing expertise in the form of subject leaders, course writers and members of the Course Team. The Course Team, comprising over 40 academics meets to develop curricula, syllabi, nominate writers. Their recommendations are then considered by an Academic Liaison Board comprising the Registrars of the participating universities, Deans of the Faculties of Arts; Subject Leaders, the Director of the Centre, and the Academic Coordinator of the programme. The universities have agreed that the Board can consider on their behalf issues relating to the programme and to give approval in principle to proposals on behalf of the university. This leads to a reduction in delays in decision making, although the Board is by no means a rubber stamp on behalf of the universities. The Board operates by consensus.

The first students registered on the programme in 1993; they apply to the Central Applications Office which handles all university entrants; they nominate the university with which they wish to register, however, from there all students study the same course materials and take the same examinations through the National Distance Education Centre. They pay their fees directly to their home university, which then passes the fees to NDEC; in turn the universities receive a percentage of the fees for their registered students. The first graduates completed their degree in 1996 and a

number of these have already completed post-graduate programmes. In 1998, over 1300 students were registered on the programme.

Although Moran and Mugridge have noted (1993) that resources, rather than an ideological concern with cooperation drive most partnerships, as it happens the source of the UK Open University/NDEC facilitation agreement lay in a series of Anglo-Irish discussions in the late 1970s early 1980s which discussed a range of areas where Britain and Ireland might cooperate. The report of these discussions noted that the Open University restricted its courses to UK residents, and recommended that both sides should commence discussions on the ways in which OU courses could be made available in Ireland, in cooperation with the proposed Unit in NIHED (Anglo-Irish Joint Studies, 1981). The possibility of cooperation between the OU and NDEC was discussed over the following years in a number of arenas. Some individuals and organisations wholeheartedly welcomed the idea, while others were concerned at the impact of introducing courses developed in a different environment on a small nation. Nevertheless, with political support from both the British and Irish sides, negotiations finally resulted in the Open University/NDEC Agreement, signed in early 1990. The Agreement, which was approved by Department of Education in Ireland and the Department of Education and Science in the UK was seen as a substantive step in Anglo-Irish cooperation.

The agreement allowed for presentation of OU courses in Ireland by agreement between the OU and NDEC either as part of an NDEC programme or as part of specific OU programmes. The OU and NDEC were to cooperate in the presentation of all OU courses offered in Ireland. There was an intention to seek credit transfer agreements; preferential terms were offered to NDEC to purchase course materials; and NDEC would be appointed as designated agent for sale of OU materials in Ireland; an annex to the agreement stated that the underlying assumptions of the agreement was to widen access to distance taught higher education in Ireland; in addition it recognised that OU courses which compete with developing NDEC programmes would not be presented.

The operation of the agreement was overseen by a Joint Liaison Board comprising seven representatives from each side. The Centre promoted a number of OU programmes in Ireland, including the MBA and foundation courses in Mathematics and Technology. The Centre identified study centres and assisted in the recruitment of tutors, as well as handling applications and providing information for enquirers. The initial projections for the MBA were underestimated, and instead of the 20-40 enrolments expected, some 52 registered in the first year, and 150 in the second.

The OU terminated the agreement in 1992. Under the direction of a new Vice-Chancellor, John Daniel the OU had decided to expand its operations to new markets and the OUUK/NDEC agreement was seen as limiting the OU in its scope. According to Daniel, 'distance education systems have been organised within national borders... not invented here protectionism can still be rationalised and camouflaged by appealing to the importance of cultural appropriateness in education.... The geopolitics of the 1990s challenge distance education to abandon parochialism' (Daniel, 1992: 20-21). The reasons for termination according to the OU included the

introduction of the single European market under the Maastricht Treaty which meant that it could no longer restrict enrolments to its courses; it had developed a new policy of allocating admission operations to its regional centres; and the imprecise wording of the Agreement had led to too many varying interpretations of what was intended. The OU made all of its programmes available to Irish residents from 1993. While the objective of the agreement, to extend access to education in Ireland had been achieved, nevertheless, the termination of the agreement was greeted with some disappointment among official circles in Ireland.

The OUUK is now a multinational operation following its decision to recruit non-resident students from 1992. In 1998, over 7000 students were resident in Europe, with Ireland as its largest foreign market, comprising almost forty percent of its non-resident students.

From analysis of the case of the National Distance Education Centre it would appear that successful partnerships have emerged where there is complementarity between the players; there is a commitment to achieving the objectives of the partnerships which overrides inter-institutional rivalries, and allows for a culture of compromise and avoidance of competition; trust between the partners has been established through formal agreements on maintenance of academic quality and ownership of students and awards; lines of communication have been established through a committee and reporting structure; and a management structure has been put in place to oversee the operational aspects of the partnerships. Of course resources are crucial in maintaining activities, however the cooperative approach has proved cost-effective, and less than 30% of income is provided in the form of state subventions. Nevertheless, as has been shown, political support for cooperation is not an indicator of success where the partners involved ultimately prove to have incompatible interests.

Implications of Globalisation

There has been much debate in the literature about the implications of technology and the globalisation process for higher education since the early 1990s. Indeed 'Tomorrow's World: the globalisation of higher education' is the theme for the 1998 Society for Research into Higher Education annual conference. The conference programme refers to the pessimistic view which sees the centuries old tradition of the universities being replaced by a handful of multi-national mega-universities beyond the control of single nations, whereas the optimists prefer to see the global flows of people and information offering 'unprecedented opportunities for mass access to learning and new forms of knowledge creation' (Abercrombie and Eggins, 1998). What are the implications of globalisation for small national distance education systems?

The new technologies are inextricably linked to the globalisation of the world economy. The media and communications companies are now truly global industries. Because, for many commentators, distance learning and new technologies are seen as synonymous, it is suggested the distance learning will spearhead the globalisation of the education market. Evans (1995:266) suggests that 'future forms of open and distance education should not be seen as matters of 'access' or 'invasion' into others' spaces and territories, but rather as an open dialogue or interaction between the

participants. However, the ethics and viability of a globalised distance education system have been questioned. Hawkridge points to the threats to national systems posed by the potential of the 'new superhighways' to create the 'big bang' in distance education which would add to the dangers of domination of distance education institutions by multinational interests who own the super highways... 'Every day, Rupert Murdoch and his ilk are buying into the means of production and distribution of knowledge. Is it too fanciful to think of large national open universities being denationalised within a decade? Will they be sold off, privatised? With the large enrolments, steady demand and efficiencies of scale, would they become rather profitable, given a power launch on the superhighway?' (Hawkridge, 1995: 9).

Clearly, small national distance education systems are vulnerable to this type of global competition as perhaps the outcome of the OU/NDEC Agreement indicates. Conversely, an optimistic view might see such competition as encouraging and strengthening national partnerships in the face of perceived threats to cherished national ideals, culture and traditions. The European Union has been to the forefront in encouraging transnational partnerships in distance education. The outcome of these policies awaits detailed analysis.

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