DELIVERING SUBJECT CHOICE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SPECIALISED DISCIPLINES
THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND’S MODEL OF SUBJECT DELIVERY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

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Using a new model of subject delivery, the University of New England (UNE–Armidale, Australia) offers specialist subjects at partner or host institutions. The model is a modified version of distance education. It is designed to meet the needs of on-campus students who wish to study a subject that their university is unable to offer as a full internal program. Students are enrolled as students of the partner institution, but the content of the courses, the teaching and assessment are the responsibility of UNE staff. The model is attractive to students and to tertiary administrators of both the host and provider universities. For students the model offers greater subject choice and flexibility; for tertiary administrators at the host institution there is built-in quality assurance and continuity of subject offerings, and for UNE an opportunity to develop a new market for distance education and to ensure the survival of low enrolment specialist language subjects.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005 the University of New England (UNE–Armidale, Australia) began offering German at host institutions using the “UNE blended model” of subject delivery. The UNE model is attractive because it provides a cost effective means of supporting a specialised discipline with built-in quality assurance. First off the rank was the University of Newcastle (Australia) where the introduction of the “UNE blended model” ensured that German continued to be offered to students. Following a presentation about the model at the Australasian conference of the Deans of Arts, Humanities and Social Science...
a number of tertiary administrators have enquired about the UNE model being introduced to teach a range of specialised subjects. In 2006 German was offered for the first time at the Townsville campus of James Cook University (JCU), and one semester of Indonesian at the University of the Sunshine Coast is being taught by UNE using the UNE model to enable the existing staff member to go on study leave. Chinese and Italian were introduced at JCU’s Cairns campus in 2007, and the French program at the Townsville campus – reduced to one staff member – will be bolstered by a collaborative project with UNE from 2008.

It is too early to assess the long-term viability of the existing German program which is now in its fourth year at the University of Newcastle, yet it is time to report on the model, its attractiveness to tertiary administrators and students, and to flag any developments or modifications that could strengthen it.

THE UNE MODEL

Collaborative teaching of Languages other than English or LOTE is not a new phenomenon, and a survey conducted for the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) reported in 2000 that 22 Australian universities out of 37 had collaborative arrangements in place (Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2000, p. 271). These arrangements were largely restricted to urban universities and involved students or staff commuting between universities. A smaller group of collaborative programs involved teleconferencing. When the data becomes available, the 2006 Deans of Arts, Social Science and Humanities (DASSH) survey of collaborative arrangements will provide up to date information on the range of collaborative programs and the implementation across the sector.

The UNE model is a new modified version of distance education designed to meet the needs of students who have chosen to study as fulltime on-campus students but who find that a full internal program in a particular subject is not offered. The model is a mixed mode delivery offering students a combination of weekly face-to-face tuition, innovative online materials and interaction, and printed distance education materials. Students remain enrolled as students of the partner institution, but the content of the courses, the teaching of the students and the assessment are the responsibility of UNE staff. It thus resembles dual mode delivery where a program is delivered to both internal and external students, however the academic staff and the curriculum are provided by UNE.

The UNE blended model addresses the difficulties that have plagued collaborative relationships in the past: “inadequate preparation, differences in semester timings, differ-
ences in fees, different levels of prerequisite knowledge, different weightings and assessment procedures” (Australasian Council of the Deans of Arts, 2005, Appendix 2, 3).

BACKGROUND

The development of the UNE model was triggered specifically when the University of Newcastle was confronted, for a variety of reasons, with a significant turnover of staff in the discipline of German, so that at the beginning of 2005 only one fulltime member of staff would remain. The Newcastle administrators were enthusiastic about negotiating with UNE so that German could continue to be offered to students as part of many degrees, and so that the one remaining staff member would have a sustainable workload and be able to access leave entitlements, including study leave. Ultimately the staff member elected to move sideways into a related discipline, however, and in Semester 1, 2005 UNE offered a full major of 8 articulated semester length language courses at the University of Newcastle and provided the academic and technical support from a distance.

The problems facing the University of Newcastle, which became public knowledge in mid 2005 and resulted in 400 academic and general staff positions being cut, may have played a role in the university’s interest in collaborative programs. However, the financial constraints faced by tertiary institutions are unfortunately all too common and form the background for the need for a collaborative model to ensure that specialist subjects survive.

UNE’s interest and involvement were driven by a similar mixture of strategic thinking, idealism and practical considerations. Firstly, as language educators, my colleagues and I were concerned about the decline in language offerings nationally (not merely in German) across the tertiary sector (Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2000). We were motivated by a desire to ensure that German continued to be offered at Newcastle as a full major. Secondly, UNE has a long history of distance education provision generally and specifically in second languages, and thus has the academic expertise and infrastructure to offer a fully supported program to Newcastle. Thirdly, like other university administrators and the Dean, I, as acting Head of School at the time, was keen to identify and develop a new market for distance education and to secure an income stream for UNE.

THE UNE MODEL IN PRACTICE

The UNE model is well suited for smaller institutions – these institutions being unlikely to offer a number of languages – and for universities that are the only tertiary institution in their area, so that other collaborative models involving moving students or staff are
not feasible. Many other collaborative models have emerged from individual circumstances and are based on a gentleman’s agreement between the heads of schools. The UNE model, however, is underpinned by an inter-institutional agreement signed off at Vice-Chancellor level, so that administrators, deans and heads of department can be assured that the program will continue to be offered. The students remain enrolled at the partner institution for the specialist subject, while UNE provides the tutors, distance education materials and an online program to foster independent learning and opportunities for additional interaction with students and academic staff at UNE.

The students at Newcastle thus enrol in Newcastle courses and remain students of the university. They are given access to the cognate online UNE units, and utilising the learning management software WebCT they receive their teaching materials from UNE online, have direct access to UNE academic staff via the discussion board, mail and voice communication tools. Consequently they have the opportunity to interact with a larger body of staff and with other cohorts of students – JCU students and UNE’s on campus and distance students – than would otherwise be the case. The extensive online interaction is supplemented by face-to-face tutorials on campus which are taught by UNE employed staff.

The decision to offer weekly tutorials in the UNE blended model rather than operating the program as a fully distance education program is of central significance. Tutorials are essential to the new program because of the nature of the student cohort. As on-campus students, the Newcastle students have enrolled at an on-campus university expecting to study in this mode and so they expect German to be like all their other subjects, and this means face-to-face interaction with their fellow students and a tutor. Moreover, they are generally young post-matriculation students who have not been prepared to study independently. While practice and research at UNE and the Open University have shown that face-to-face tuition is not essential for the acquisition of communicative competency (Hutchinson, 1998, p. 78; Hutchinson, Koplin & McLoughlin, 2002), the tutorials are important if these students are to become successful independent learners. Learning strategies must be built into the teaching materials (White, 2003, pp. 154–156; Hurd, 2005, p.12), and the tutorials focus on the embedding of these strategies as well as giving students the opportunity to practise the skills – especially speaking – that have to be developed if they are to achieve communicative competency in a second language.

There are fewer tutorials per week than is usual in a fully internal language program. Language subjects traditionally have offered 5 to 6 hours per week for elementary or ab initio students and only slightly fewer for more advanced students. To augment the students’ exposure to the target language and to create the feeling of being part of a com-
munity, similar to that created by being part of a traditional program based in a department, students are required to participate in online interactive tasks. (The development of the assessment tasks was funded by a CASR Higher Education Innovations Program Grant (Dunne, 2004)).

The online presence of the UNE model is an essential component. It provides students with resources, materials, exercises and activities that give them access to authentic material to extend and consolidate all four skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking. The online interface allows mediated access to authentic language materials, and the assessment tasks – web quests and games – are structured to foster group work and interaction. Through regular online interaction, students not only receive support and guidance from the UNE academic staff, but they also create a community of practice with their fellow students, all of which flows on to enhanced motivation. The students benefit from the input of their fellow learners and enhance their language skills by negotiating meaning with others so that the learner becomes a tutor (cf. Tuidini, 2005, p. 219, 226). Informal evidence provided by discussion board postings indicates that students are using the discussion board to support their peers who are experiencing performance anxiety.

The online interface facilitates the creation of a sense of community with the larger group of students at UNE (and since the beginning of 2006 with the student group at JCU). Online interaction is also essential because students need to develop independent learning strategies, yet as commencing, post-matriculation students they tend to have come from structured learning environments in which the student had little independence and autonomy. In an online environment, students gain the support that they need to cope successfully with independent study. They develop a community of practice where they have opportunities to learn by negotiating meaning with their fellow students, and communication with others in the chat rooms and bulletin boards can be an effective means of combating language anxiety, a significant issue for many students, but especially distance education students.

Reading and writing skills have tended to be more easily developed in distance education, and researchers were divided on whether speaking could be taught via distance methods. Holmberg, Schelley and White state: “It is difficult to see how the ability to converse in a foreign language can be taught without practice in conversation” (Holmberg, Schelley & White, 2005, p. 176). UNE has been doing this since 1965: whereas in the past students submitted cassettes with spoken responses and gained practice in speaking at residential schools, today, the students in the blended model have access to tutorials for speaking practice and also, using the software Wimba Voice Tools, have additional opportunities. They can talk asynchronously with Wimba Voice Board and synchronously
with Wimba Voice Chat. The introduction of a virtual learning environment (VLE) such as Elluminate will further enhance the possibilities of synchronous voiced communication.

In courses with a strong online presence, the style of the online tutor is an important variable. Tutors need to have cognitive and social style in their repertoire of communication skills. The cognitive style has always been an element of teacher-student interaction, and it comes into play when the tutor intervenes to explain, correct or query student language utterances. In the absence of personal and visual contact – and the Newcastle students may never meet the UNE staff face-to-face – tutors’ ability to come across as human beings and to communicate this dimension of their personalities assumes greater importance (Hauck & Hempel, 2005, p. 271; White, 2003, p. 166).

The UNE model for German at Newcastle delivers a program which addresses academics’ and administrators’ concerns about such issues as parity of assessment, prerequisites for courses, equity and quality assurance. The program is delivered by an institution with great expertise in distance education, and developed by a team of academic language educators who in turn are backed up by infrastructure support. Because the program is a cohesive, articulated program of courses, prerequisites are addressed by the sequential nature of the program. The students follow the same curriculum as their peers at other institutions (JCU and UNE) where the program is offered and complete the same assessment tasks, all of which are marked by UNE staff to ensure parity of assessment. Assessment includes a final, invigilated examination that is held simultaneously in all universities, so that the integrity of the examination process is assured. All students have access to the same materials and online support so that issues of equity are largely addressed. Finally, quality assurance is ensured by students following a program that is devised and supported by a team of language educators at UNE. Quality is monitored using systemic procedures: students are surveyed by the host institution using its evaluation tool for measuring student satisfaction.

The students remain students of their home university so load is retained, and UNE is paid a fee for service per student enrolled at the census date.1 The difference between the fee paid to UNE and the DEST /DEEWR income earned is retained by the host institution and covers the costs associated with library holdings of textbook copies and dictionaries; the miscellaneous costs associated with examinations (invigilation, examination booklets); and administrative costs such as maintenance of the web pages listing German courses.

The UNE model is in many respects analogous to the distributed learning model in which face-to-face teaching is augmented with online interaction and tasks (White, 2003, pp. 31–32). However, in distributed learning both the face-to-face and the online inter-
action are offered by the same institution. In our model, the students at the host institution interact with other cohorts of students, which gives them broader exposure not merely to students and staff but also to a variety of learning styles. The UNE model might also seem similar to the Open University model in which students attend tutorials throughout the semester at regional centres. There is however, a major and significant difference in the student cohorts. The students at the Open University have chosen a distance mode whereas the students at most Australian universities have not.

**ADVANTAGES OF THE UNE MODEL**

For students, the UNE model is attractive because it offers the best features of all modes of delivery. Students have quality intensive face-to-face instruction to hone their active speaking and listening skills and to reinforce their understanding of meta dimensions of second language learning such as learning strategies. They interact with a wider range of academic staff – their campus tutor and UNE academic staff online; have step by step guidance through the subject matter of the course; and have online quizzes and interactive games to monitor their command of the subject matter. Additionally, the mix of elements offers students great flexibility in the use of their time, a factor which is an important consideration for many students who have to maintain employment to support themselves while studying. The flexibility is also valued by students enrolled in highly structured programs such as medicine, architecture or teaching, because they can accommodate a language subject in their schedules more easily. Finally the community of practice established in the online fora is more substantial and robust, because of access to diverse cohorts of students, including mature age students.

The UNE model is preferable to cross-institutional enrolment not only because of the component of face-to-face instruction, but also because it allows students to do a full three year major within a pass undergraduate degree. Cross institutional enrolment procedures and the lead time for distance education programs mean that first year students, unless they can cross town to attend lectures personally, have to wait a semester or a year before commencing their studies: UNE’s closing date for cross institutional enrolment in Semester 1 of any given year is in the previous year, because of the time that has to be allowed for enrolment and for external materials to be posted to students. As a result, commencing students who are informed of their university place in January can enrol in Second Semester at the earliest. Since language study is cumulative and few institutions have rolling offerings where a first unit in a sequence is offered again in second semester, in effect this means that students can only commence study by cross
institutional enrolment in their second year of full time study. A major sequence is therefore not possible.

For tertiary administrators, deans and heads of school in the partner institution, the UNE model offers some additional advantages. That institution retains load and pays UNE a fee for service. UNE is paid for each student enrolled in the program at the HECS census date. The fee is set as a fixed percentage of the HECS income that is paid to the university, and not as a percentage of the much smaller amount that flows down to the school or department. As students remain enrolled at their home institution, the question of different fees does not arise.

The program enables subject choice for students by allowing a greater range of subjects to be offered in an institution, without jeopardising quality, than would perhaps be possible in a tertiary sector of increasingly tight resources and stricter adherence to principles of economy of scale.

Collaborative programs are frequently dependent on the cooperation and goodwill of the participants. The German program at Newcastle is, however, not dependent on individual goodwill for its existence, rather it is founded in systemic agreements and contractual arrangements between the two universities. Nevertheless, in practice good will is imperative for the smooth operation and promotion of the program, and especially for the day to day running. The UNE model provides incentives for the partner university to promote the program because the university retains load and also some of the HECS income. This means that the department or school has funds to meet the few administrative costs associated with hosting the courses such as purchasing library textbooks, meeting administration costs and examination costs.

The UNE model offers a means of bolstering existing programs with small staff numbers and also of introducing a subject which will complement existing offerings, but where the extent of future enrolments is uncertain. In 2006, UNE built on its experiences at Newcastle and entered into contractual arrangements with James Cook University to teach German at the Townsville campus. German had not previously been included in their portfolio of subjects available to students doing the Bachelor of Arts, although it had been attempted using a traditional distance model in the early 1990’s. While student numbers in Townsville are sound, they are not as strong in the first year of the program as they were in Newcastle. One can speculate on the reasons: it may be because there is no history of offering the language at JCU and there was no advertising because the time frame did not allow it. In 2007 Chinese and Italian were introduced to the Cairns campus of James Cook, thus enabling the university to respond to long-standing community interest in both languages. In 2008, in response to staff movements in French, the UNE
model enabled the major to be offered by supplementing the units offered by the remaining staff.

A further application of the UNE model is its use to enable staff to manage their workloads so that research time is not eroded and they can take sabbatical leave when it is due. The need to preserve research time will become even more important when the ERA (Excellence for Research in Australia) is introduced. In the second half of 2006 UNE Indonesianists were teaching courses at the University of the Sunshine Coast while the existing full time academic was on leave. This type of arrangement could theoretically pose some challenges that do not present themselves in the program at Newcastle. If textbooks and curricula differ so that effectively two distinct programs are offered by UNE, then economies of scale may not be possible. Generally, however, course structures for second language acquisition in LOTE are sufficiently similar for this to be a minor issue, and the USC program is a case at point: the curricula have been married without any disruption to student progress.

There are also advantages for UNE. The disciplines themselves are strengthened as a new market for a modified distance education program is developed. Distance education expertise is being utilised and all new developments in pedagogy and practice are also available to UNE on campus and distance students. Finally, the programs produce an income stream, an attractive outcome for any university in the present climate.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The courses introduced to date at Newcastle and James Cook, and at Sunshine Coast are language programs. As students progress through the major, “content” courses in literature, film, politics and or linguistics will need to be introduced. For courses of this type a second model of collaboration is being explored. Where a discipline has a small staffing complement, pooling of resources is an option. Staff members each identify one or two content courses corresponding to their research expertise. These can then be offered in sequence to all member universities using traditional distance materials with the staff at each institution acting as facilitating tutors on issues related to the course. Making the courses available to a number of institutions, and rotating the courses on offer, would assist in freeing up time for research, and would enable staff to go on study leave. Where there is no existing staff complement, courses can be offered by UNE at a number of host institutions using teleconferencing, or virtual learning environments such as Elluminate, or traditional distance materials supplemented by audio and video podcasts.
There remain some other dimensions of a full portfolio of subject offerings that need to be addressed in the near future. Many students wish to pursue further study at Honours level. It is conceivable that an honours program could be offered by the home and partner institution in a collaborative fashion: the student would have disciplinary supervision from the provider university, i.e. UNE, and would have a secondary supervisor in the partner institution who comes from a cognate discipline and who would then provide guidance in a more general sense. This would require a different funding formula.

Organisational difficulties are challenging, but to date have all been resolved. Universities do not always have the same number of weeks in semester, and these differences have to be reflected in assignment dates. While assignment dates can be staggered to reflect this difference, the examination weeks also tend to differ so that there is only a relatively small overlapping period in which the students of all universities expect to sit their exams. Timetabling an examination for the same day and time within the respective examination periods takes some coordination, but we have been able to do this. So far the UNE model is offered at institutions on the East coast of Australia, which means that there are no differences in time zones to consider. (James Cook University is in Queensland, a state that does not have daylight saving in summer. This, however, is not a problem as the time difference is only an hour, so that one group of students is still in the exam when the second starts.)

CONCLUSION

Collaborative ventures such as the UNE model may be a means of ensuring the survival of some specialist subjects such as languages other than English, at least in regional universities or sole institutions in an urban setting such as Charles Darwin. The challenges facing administrators and academics wishing to see specialist subjects survive are unlikely to decrease, let alone disappear. Even if some specialist subjects are declared to be of national strategic significance, as has been the case with Indonesian and Arabic in the USA, other specialist subjects are unlikely to benefit directly from any flow on. Rather, in a tertiary sector with fixed resources they are more likely to experience a further restriction of their viability as a result. The UNE model delivers a program that has built-in quality assurance, is cost effective and matches delivery mode with the needs of the internal, post-matriculation student cohort.
ENDNOTES

1 The census date (31 March for Semester 1, and 31 August for Semester 2) is the date on which enrolments are assessed for the purpose of determining students’ liability for the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS).

REFERENCES


Dunne, K. (2004). *Cross institutional rationalisation of language teaching: Provision of German at the University of Newcastle by UNE. CASR Higher Education Innovation Program Grant* (20 pp.).


