

E-LEARNING: COLLABORATION, CONTEXTUALISATION AND GLOBALISATION: A HIGHER EDUCATION EXAMPLE FROM AFRICA AND AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

“The revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs) is resulting in a revolution in education systems around the world. Computers are entering the classrooms, students have access to the Internet, schools are linked together in “learning networks”, etc. [...] Some developing countries are also taking important steps to ensure that they, too, are able to take advantage of the ICT revolution and to participate in the information society. Most of the African continent is lagging behind, both in terms of installing the necessary information and communication infrastructure required to participate in the information society, and in terms of integrating ICTs in the education sector to enhance the learning process. Given the recent improvements in Africa’s information and communication infrastructure, distance education could significantly contribute to the attainment of educational goals.”

Phillip, B. 2000 p. 1

However, as with most educational technologies, the technological ‘problems’ are usually the most easily fixed. It is inevitably the associated human and systemic issues that take the greatest effort and the most time to address.

International education is not new. The mix of ICT and education is more recent. The theme of this Symposium explores “how e-Learning³⁵ should be in this 21st Century where multi-cultures and polyglot societies are aiming for co-existence”. Specifically this paper will investigate strategies for responding sensitively to local and or cultural issue in the development of a collaborative arrangement to provide ICT-based higher education opportunities to developing Sub-Saharan Africa.

The process of structuring appropriate partnerships to facilitate international e-Learning activities is critical and will demand increasing attention as e-Learning becomes an even more global enterprise. At one level, because of the global availability of online education, potentially any student could enrol anywhere accepting the expectation that she/he will adapt to the cultural, pedagogical and administrative proclivities of the providing organisation.

However, when the process is part of a more structured international initiative, a number of other issues such as collaboration on processes, cultural sensitivity, agreement on outcomes, structuring, initiative design and roles, decision making, ownership of knowledge and project activities, relationship management and ethical action need to be canvassed more formally.

This paper takes a current Australian government Aid Agency (AusAID) ICT-based initiative with the African Virtual University (AVU) as a case study and tracks these issues as some of them impact on project development. It will briefly overview the possibilities of ICT-based education particularly in the African context, and using the AusAID funded African Virtual University Initiative as the example, discuss some of the issues arising from its inception to date, including policy implications, management, communications through collaboration and negotiation and the contextualisation of the curriculum and instruction. Finally the paper identifies some lessons learned to date.

Introduction

The current literature concerning international online distance education most often addresses the technology while pedagogical issues in the context of cultural differences can be found in the education literature. These issues have been discussed during the other sessions of this symposium: that is multicultural co-existence and e-Learning and e-Learning interface for multicultural co-existence, so I will not raise them again here. I merely wish to point out that all of these issues are related to each other and need to be investigated in the broader context.

Of course it would be remiss of me not to point out that this paper is written from my perspective and therefore may not fully represent the position of the Initiative collaborators - Curtin University of Technology, AusAID, the African Virtual University or Addis Ababa University or my colleagues. A more representative analysis will be available through the evaluation process which has been put in place. These will comprise the annual report and a final evaluation at the end of the three years.

AusAID funded African Virtual University Initiative overview

Briefly, I would like to provide some background for this paper. The Australian Government Aid Agency, AusAID has chosen Curtin University of Technology as the preferred tenderer to build capacity within the African Virtual University and the AVU partners.

Initiative Goal

Using ICT to increase access to quality higher education across sub-Saharan Africa.

Purpose

To strengthen the capacity of the AVU and its partner institutions to facilitate the development and delivery of accredited degree and diploma programs.

Context

This project is part of the Virtual Colombo Plan jointly announced, in late 2001, by the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs (Honourable Alexander Downer) and the President of the World Bank (James Wolfensohn). As such, the initiative aims to work in collaboration with the AVU in building capacity both within the AVU and its partner institutions. Generally the initiative focuses on bridging the 'digital divide' in higher education. Specifically the initiative has as its outcomes the development and deployment of business degrees and diplomas within the partner institutions and enhancing staff development in distance and online education. It is also a major departure from previous AVU distributed video conference provision of courses - an issue which is itself identified as a major risk to be managed by Curtin and AAU. Wolff (2002) highlights that there was a perceived need for the AVU to change from satellite based broadcast TV which has "been relatively expensive and inflexible" to asynchronous on-line learning which is "now considered the technology of choice for virtual learning." AVU also decided to start with courses from elite US and other developed country universities to broadcast to Africa. This resulted, rightly or wrongly, in the impression of "colonization" from the north. (p3)

The project design builds on the individual strengths of the four collaborating organisations - Curtin, AAU, AVU and AusAID, to ensure pedagogically, financially and technologically viable and sustainable outcomes for the organisations, staff and students. Curtin already partners many overseas universities in the provision of high quality and culturally appropriate education. It has extensive experience adapting its educational offerings in different socio-cultural contexts. Its business courses recognise that there is no single model for market economies and students have to work in their own socio-political system once they graduate. Since its establishment fifty years ago, Addis Ababa has developed strong international linkages within and outside Africa, and with the support of the Ethiopian Government is poised to take full advantage of these new developments in distance and open learning and ICT based programs. Wolff (2002) further notes that "AVU centers (sic) were inadequately integrated into universities where they were located. Not enough attention was paid to governance, training and maintenance, and many of the centers have had technical and management problems." (p3) AusAID has a sound background in identifying regional needs and implementing and monitoring appropriate projects in a cost effective manner.

The Initiative is comprised of four components:

Component 1.1: Postgraduate Studies in Instructional Design

The postgraduate course in instructional design and educational technology will be provided by the Curtin Faculty of Education which offers instructional design courses at various levels of study with flexible entry and exit points. This degree has a strong practical focus and the robust theoretical underpinnings needed for instructional designers to respond appropriately to ever-changing learning technologies in contextually appropriate ways. It is therefore particularly well suited to people who design learning materials for educational environments that are highly reliant on information and communication technologies. By applying what they learn about instructional design and educational technology to practical development projects within their own institutions, students play an important role in spreading this expertise amongst their professional colleagues and addressing specific local needs.

Component 1.2: Licensing of Instructional Design Program

Curtin as the Australian Managing Contractor (AMC) will license the Postgraduate Studies in Instructional Design course (used in component 1.1) to the AVU on the understanding that due recognition of Curtin's intellectual property will be included.

Component 1.3: CD-ROM Guide for Tutors

This component outcome will be a CD-ROM to be used as:

- a self study program ('Just-in-time' training format); and
- a resource for more formal in-service workshops.

The CD-ROM will provide some of the central resources in high and low end media to meet the varying technical standards of the partner institutions. In general, the *Guide for Tutors* will be drawn from two proven sources. The first is an online 'Tutoring Online Training Program' developed and delivered by the Learning Support Network at Curtin. While there will be need for re-contextualisation, a similar underpinning structure and approach will be used. The second source will be materials developed and used by the National Pedagogical Resource Centre for Higher Education at the Institute of Educational Research of the Addis Ababa University for their Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Training Workshop. The selection of content will be a collaborative effort between staff of Curtin and Addis Ababa Universities.

As well as using its own media rich resources, the CD-ROM will also contain embedded links to relevant internet sites which will enable online users to access appropriate enrichment materials. Contextualisation will be overseen by the Joint

Curriculum Contextualisation Committee (JCCC).

Component 2.1: Technical Assistance to AVU Nairobi

Three consultancies will be provided each year for three years. The major issues identified by the AVU for the first year consultancies are:

Consultancy 1 - Policy Development

Consultancy 2 - ICT-enhanced distance learning - systems integration

Consultancy 3 - Implementation of Learning Management System

Component 2.3

Appropriate sources of free information for AVU Digital Library

Component 3.1: Transfer of Business Studies Programs

Online materials for up to 100 units of study in Business Studies will be provided to the AVU.

The *Diploma of Business* will be provided by Curtin Kalgoorlie Campus Vocational Training and Education Centre. It is a competency-based course designed according to Australian National Training Authority guidelines as a two year, part-time diploma. However it can be re-configured to be taken in 18 months should the AVU see this as appropriate. This competency-based diploma articulates with the Bachelor of Business Administration (with up to one year's credit) provided by Curtin Business School. The Diploma of Business is designed to meet industry competency needs within the private (including small business) and public sectors.

This *Degree Course* is structured around a common core in first year leading to a wide range of optional strands. Addis Ababa University and the Curtin - African Country Reference Group have indicated that a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) would provide the preferred course name and pattern. The four strands are Human Resource Development, Finance, Accounting and Marketing. In order to focus the student enrolments into economically viable patterns, it is intended to bring the degree on stream in a chronological sequence. That is, begin the first year with common core units, providing AVU with a significant initial cash flow, and then provide the (proposed) majors/strands in their yearly sequence. Given that each strand requires students to take some 'elective' units, it is proposed to use units from other majors/strands as the electives, again concentrating enrolments. It should be understood that, over the life of the project, needs of the AVU and the LPU will evolve along with the range of on-line units. The remaining units in each of the strands will be selected through on-going negotiations between AMT, CBS Program Co-ordinator, LPU Business Studies representative and AVU.

Contextualisation of Diploma and Degree Units

Curtin Business School already has processes in place for contextualising material taught overseas, e.g. teaching local, rather than Australian industrial relations law and finance/banking units taught in Malaysia which use case histories on Islamic banking principles. A similar approach would be taken for AVU units. CBS has long recognised that an implied single global (i.e. US) model for a market economy is of little value in the Asian context (where governments may play a more significant role in business), and may be of less value still in the African context. Thus all unit content for AVU will be substantially adapted for the regional context. The LPU and Curtin staff in conjunction with the JCCC will provide information, templates and workshops (both online at the skills transfer site and face-to-face) for content developers, and review materials which have undergone the contextualisation process.

Component 3.2: Quality Assurance of Course Program Delivery

Quality assurance at Curtin is provided in the context of the University's Vision and Mission Statement and a well-defined corporate strategy focused on the consolidation of mutually-beneficial partnerships. Curtin as AMC will apply Quality Assurance strategies and tools which are currently used in its international operations. A centrally provided evaluation of teaching quality survey and a version of the unit experience questionnaire already adapted for international activities form the core of the suite of instruments. These instruments are premised on the local partner being provided with clear guidelines for delivery against which outcomes can be assessed through moderation and student feedback.

With respect to quality of materials, the JCCC will provide standards for material quality against which each unit can be measured. These will include Curtin's Standards for Online Teaching (SOLT - <http://cea.curtin.edu.au/solt/>). Also, each course will be moderated to ensure that it meets acceptable international standards, including reviewing assignments and other assessment scripts.

Component 3.3: Skills transfer Between AMC and Lead Partner University

Given that this project focuses on the provision of educational opportunities through the internet, it is appropriate that the skills transfer process will occur within a web environment. Curtin has produced a web site for this initiative. The Curtin/Addis Ababa/AVU Skills Transfer and Mentoring Site will:

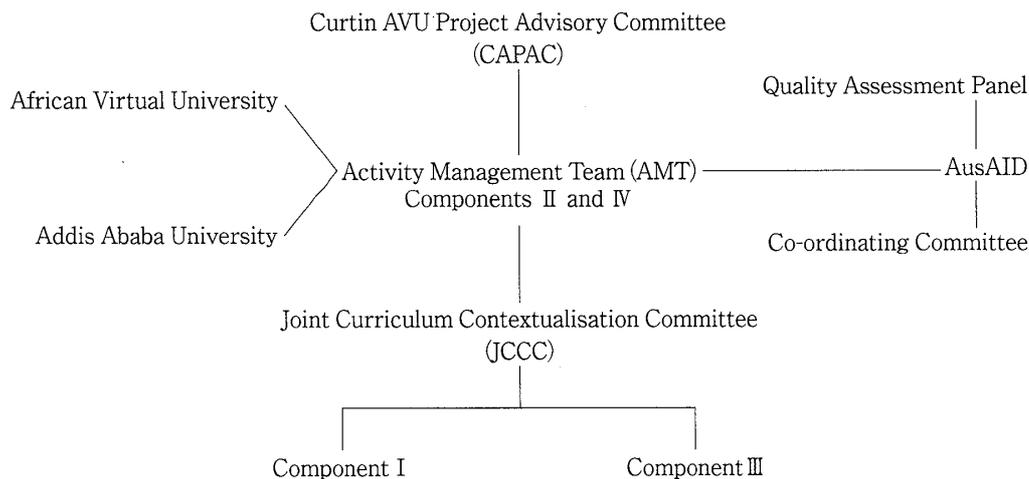
- provide upload facilities;
- enable asynchronous meetings to occur;
- make available JCCC templates, contextualisation and QA processes;
- develop and transfer requisite skills; and

- enable mentoring, online moderation, discussion, collaboration and skill sharing.

Through such exposure to an online experience, staff of the LPU and other partner institutions will, in a meta-cognitive and experiential way, understand what their students may encounter. The site will also be linked with the Tutor CD-ROM. The visits of the Director, AVU Learning Centre and the Associate Dean of Business will be undertaken as early as possible so that discussions can be held regarding the implementation of the project and the overall design of the site.

Component 4.1: Activity Management

Effective project management of the activities is critical to the success of the AVU project, as is the appointment of experienced personnel to key project roles and responsibilities. The design of this project provides for clear management structures and protocols without ‘over-managing’. The AVU Project Office will be the co-ordinating mechanism within Curtin and with key stakeholders for all proposed AVU activities.



Analysis and Discussion

ICT-based education and globalisation in sub-Saharan Africa

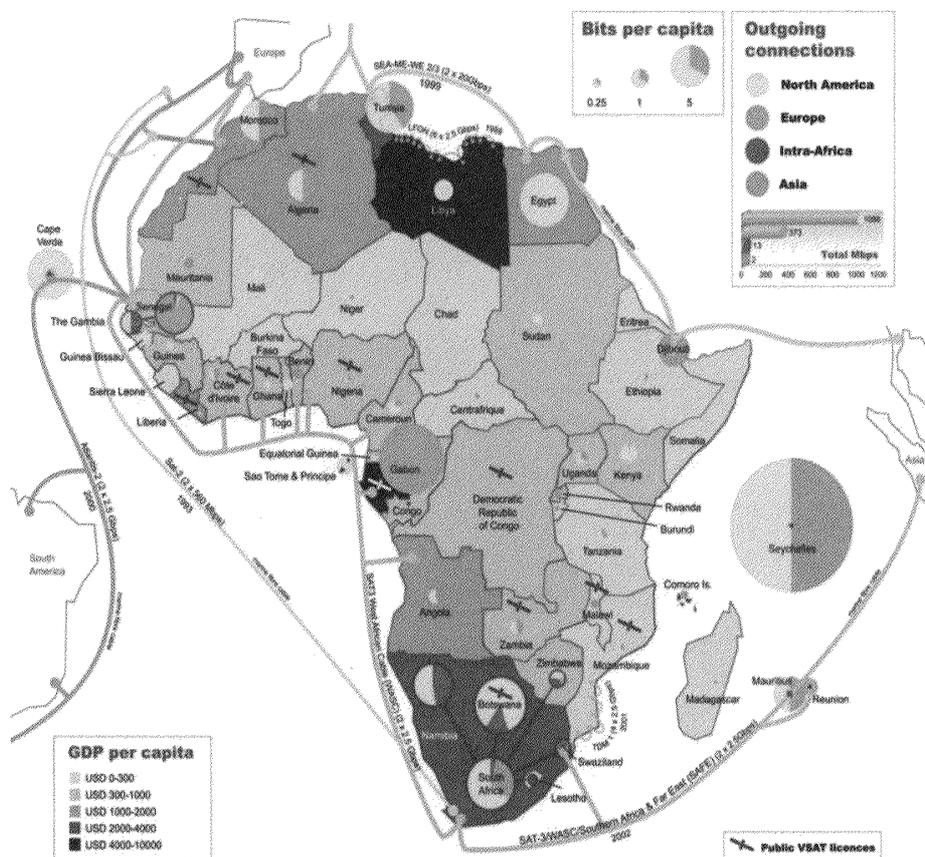
In order to investigate more thoroughly the implementation of such a complex project, the major issue of the globalisation of education, particularly through ICT-based distance education needs to be addressed. Even the terms ‘distance education’ or ‘distance learning’ may have varying interpretations in North America and Australia as evidenced in the different approaches - synchronous and asynchronous.

To date much of the rhetoric regarding the global market for ICT-based distance education remains unrealised, even in the leading countries. Rather than canvass at great length the complex issues of globalised, ICT-based education, I would refer you to the very thorough studies undertaken for the Australian Government (Cunningham

et.al. 1997) <http://www.detya.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip97-22/eip9722.pdf> and (Cunningham et.al. 2000) http://www.detya.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip00_3/bbe.pdf, and the conference proceedings reviewing this position (Gallagher 2001) http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/eippubs/eip01_7/01_7.pdf. While many ICT-based teaching developments abound, (most recently AllLearn, UMassOnLine, Universitas 21 and University of Phoenix) both systemic and technological issues still need to be resolved before such developments can be realised more widely. Clearly the twin impediments of human and systemic capacity building are of great importance in dealing with sub-Saharan Africa. Phillip's (2000, 2001) message for how development agencies can assist draws on the UNDP's Hans D'Orville's 'formula' - A+6Cs: Awareness and Advocacy; Connectivity; Capacity; Content; Creativity; Communications and networking; and Cash. (2001: p 30) While each of these issues is demonstrably important to the AVU Initiative, I would like to spend a short time focusing on six "Cs", as they will clearly impact most directly on the outcomes.

Connectivity

The map below (from <http://www.idrc.ca/acacia/divide/>) provides a salutary warning for any collaborators targeting ICT-based higher education in sub-Saharan Africa - even more so from the point of view of Curtin's choice of a Lead Partner University (LPU). Ethiopia has one of the lowest connectivity levels of sub-Saharan Africa.



As Phillip (2001) highlights, low levels of connectivity and unreliable power supply are endemic throughout the region. The point is also made that as well as low connectivity at 'country level' there are important variations within countries as some areas (particularly metropolitan) may have good quality connectivity, whereas rural areas are likely to have none. As such infrastructure issues can only be addressed at national government level, it is clear that the criteria which then became important in choosing a partner were not technical, but rather human and systemic - for example AAU's enthusiasm, quality of staff and internal infrastructure. This attitude emphasises the importance that Curtin placed institutional relationships above national technical capability - technical problems can be resolved through creative use of the technologies - in this case the potential for the use of simple 'low technical overhead' design and CD-ROM where necessary. Developing trust through institutional relationships is more difficult and takes much more time and energy to create and sustain.

Capacity

Clearly the main aim of this Initiative is to build capacity within the AVU and its network and more specifically the LPU. Capacity in this context takes a number of forms: technical, systemic, management, content (see below) and teaching and learning skills in ICT-based higher education. Such capacity building cannot be merely transplanting these 'products' but must create versions of them in forms which are sensitive and responsive to the local context. Hence in this initiative, much effort is going into the contextualisation of, not only the content, but also the supporting knowledge and skills on which sustainability will so critically depend. Adding to the complexity of capacity building in this initiative is the fact that the tender specifications stipulated that virtually all of the work had to be done through the internet. While there are a limited number of visits and consultancies, the bulk of the work will be done online. This adds a further dimension to the implementation of the initiative given the lower levels of connectivity and internet experience in Africa compared with Curtin. Expectations of both the LPU and the Curtin staff involved in the skills transfer and capacity building will need to be carefully managed.

Content

The provision of content through online units of study is by far the major proportion of this initiative. The rationale behind the selection of business studies as the 'content vehicle' is 'western capitalist' in nature and follows the argument: through the provision of business studies not only will participating higher education 'leap frog' the 'digital divide', but the participating students will develop important skills in business which will help to develop local economies and hence improve economic conditions for all. A more in depth discussion of this philosophy will need to be left for another time and place. Never-the-less, the level of interest in such

studies is significant and therefore it is a legitimate focus of content.

The contextualisation of this content therefore assumes greater significance through the engagement with the LPU. However, even the LPU (based in Ethiopia) cannot hope to 'represent' all sub-Saharan Africa. National differences, particularly in areas like law and commerce policy and protocols could cause many development and interpretation problems. A focus on international business and anticipating problematic content will provide some answers, but inevitably there will need to be country specific changes handled by the AVU partner in each country.

Creativity

The Initiative will always be iterative: re-designed as it progresses through collaborative interaction. The fact that there are four partners, each with its own aims and ideas has meant that the Curtin-based Activity Management Team has put in place strategies for managing the expectations of these partners. When the students and other participant universities are added to the mix, the need for dynamic, responsive and creative management is plain. One of the outcomes of the paucity of local African infrastructure has been the need to be creative in developing management, technical and implementation solutions. Examples of these might be seen in the management structure. A small Activity Management Team for a complex project supports secure and speedy communications. The initiative is 'modular' in structure and while certain individuals might work in a number of modules, the activity in each is relatively independent so as delays in one will have limited impact on another. Similarly with technical development, sophisticated design leads to simplicity of output and implementation. The 'master web site' where much of the development and many of the transactions take place allows for easy storage of, and access to information for the various stages, i.e. it is a work area, communications interface and archive. The implementation of the Learning Management System (LMS) also needs to be approached in a manner appropriate to the local context to support simplicity in version control, role-out, student to student to tutor interactions and varying bandwidth restrictions.

One of the important contributions which the creative use of technology may make in the future to projects like this is the ability to customise the content and processes more closely to the perceived needs of students and staff. Content Management Systems which are being researched at Curtin's Learning Support Network will provide the opportunity for the students to be recognised and materials and services tailored to their needs through a portal, and without the need for individual Learning Management System development.

Communications and networking

We need to examine this issue at two levels: technical and managerial.

Technical

Given the problematic nature of ICT infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa, the Initiative is designed to make use of a range of technologies making it less susceptible to outages. Internet, telephony and courier services have been identified as the most likely combination, but others (e.g. satellite delivered videoconferencing) may well be needed in extreme circumstances. One of the early consultancies focuses on networks and endeavouring to link them and maximise compatibility at minimum extra cost.

Managerial

The project management plan is centred on direct and simple communication processes. Two (only) committees focus the activities of individuals and groups working closely using internet communications to achieve their agreed outcomes. Central control is reduced as far as possible, but communications through the established technologies can be monitored by all participants to enable them to follow progress. Through archiving the online discussion, the Activity Management Team hopes to develop a 'corporate memory' which will reduce the reliance on specific individuals to ensure that an accurate record of events is held for evaluation and further developments.

Cash

The Australian people are financing this Initiative through the Australian Government Aid Agency AusAID. The project is premised on AusAID funding Australian provision through Curtin and some of the African partners' activities, with the African partners funding some costs through infrastructure choices which they would need to make in any event and through recovering some of the costs from participants (including students) and other aid sources (government, and bilateral and multi-lateral donors). Amutabi (2002) in a paper submitted to the recent Commonwealth of Learning Forum in Durban, South Africa, underlines the point that this mechanism for funding such projects is itself controversial in development politics. He argues "that emasculation of human resource development as is being done in Africa today will only ensure continued domination of Africa by the North unless something drastic is done. Short term programs like those carried out by the African Virtual University under the World Bank which emphasize learning by a few should be discouraged in favour of mass education that has and is being practiced in the Americas and Europe. The financing models in this paper are based on the realization that the cost of education in many universities in Africa today is increasingly moving beyond the reach of many learners. Potential learners from poor families have therefore no hope of getting higher education, making education to become a preserve of the rich. Distance education, which helped learners from poor

backgrounds in social mobility, is now in great danger.” (Abstract Booklet) It is argued within this Initiative that any such ‘leading edge’ approach as this is necessarily elitist and initially only able to be implemented through students paying fees. The long term benefit is in establishing the infrastructure and developing the capacity which will enable ICT-based higher education to be ‘massified’ and made available to all socio-economic groups. As with all distance education provision, the upfront costs are significantly higher than for face to face, whereas the ongoing costs are much more responsive to larger numbers.

Managing information and communications technology (ICT) for knowledge networks and cultural diversity

The more traditional approach to such a project could be typified as transferring blocks of knowledge (as defined in units of study or courses) from one owner (providing university) to another (the recipient university). However, such approaches tend to reduce cultural diversity and support a ‘one-way’ view of international education. More truly collaborative approaches view international education projects as a multi channel process, ‘knowledge’ as more dynamic and learning environments as providing collaborative structures to enhance this flow in all directions between the ‘teacher’ and ‘learner’ and between participating institutions.

In this view, ICT must ensure that it fosters:

- attitudes responsive to diversity (cultural, environmental, social);
- teaching and learning as a collaborative, social process;
- activities that enhance diversity; and
- interactions based upon inclusiveness, equality and respect.

Successfully managing such environments and relationships calls for ICT to be used to encourage diversity (including cultural diversity) while meeting stakeholder requirements and maintaining quality standards. Developing a simplified, effective form of management for such a sophisticated view of international education partnerships becomes the central issues in the case study. The key to an appropriate solution is to identify what forms of interactions ICT privileges in this context and how its most appropriate uses can be exploited. Exploitation must be cost effective but grounded in the experience of all participants. As some will have greater experience, the initial thrust must be to train everyone to at least an agreed basic level of operational skills.

Contextualisation

The framework which has been used clearly identifies the contextualisation

issues that need to be addressed within this initiative based on five broad “Fields of Contextualisation”. These are:

- partnership and alliance management
- course and curriculum
- pedagogy
- instruction/materials design
- interface design

Each of the fields of contextualisation will be managed by an individual or small group, all of whom report to the AMT which in turn reports to the Curtin AVU Project Advisory Committee (CAPAC). In this way, the contextualisation can be coordinated, monitored and evaluated in a timely manner. A number of these fields are addressed elsewhere in this Symposium Research Report, so within the limits of this paper, I wish to further discuss the issue of partnerships/alliance development.

Partnership and alliance management in an international context

As a background to understanding some aspects of the relationships which need to be forged for the development of a successful partnership or alliance in ICT-based international teaching, I would like to consider a framework provided by Grigg (2001). Within the definitions provided by Howarth, Gillin and Bailey (1995), of service arrangements, opportunistic arrangements and stakeholders’ arrangements, the AusAID AVU Initiative would be considered opportunistic. If one is to consider the four ‘partners’ involved i.e. AusAID (the financier), Curtin (content - product and service provider), AVU (distribution channel provider) and AAU (market access provider) then the complexity of the nature of the alliance becomes self-evident. This arrangement is not unique to this Initiative. The fact is, that the uptake of ICT-based education has increased the opportunity for these relationships to develop. Grigg provides the example of U 21 Global. In terms of the Howarth et.al. definition, this partnership or alliance allows each of the four partners to enter or extend their business activities. For AusAID it provides the opportunity to build capacity (one of its strategic aims) in developing nations; for AVU it provides ready access to resources to enable it to extend ICT-based award courses through sub-Saharan Africa; for AAU it provides a quick and secure opportunity to enter the ICT-based distance education market in Ethiopia and meet (at least in part) an enormous un-met demand for higher education places; and finally for Curtin it provides the opportunity to realise its aim to be an ‘international university’, contributing to the development of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa and at the same time receiving acknowledgment of such activity within the international education world.

Having identified the type of alliance being developed, what are the inherent

dangers. Again, Howarth et.al. provide useful categories: loss of control (independence and autonomy, flexibility, position), finding sufficient resources (for developing the partnership) and loss of competitive position (through reliance on partners' organisation, skills and assets). Over-riding these is the issue of trust as the basis for sustaining the relationship. Throughout the difficult and (from an Australian position) slow period of negotiation, the intent of the Australian partners was to develop this sense of trust and collaboration.

The remaining issue impacting on the partnership is that of culture. Clearly even the understanding of the partnership is subject to cultural interpretation. This is most clearly exemplified in the use of the term "sub-Saharan Africa". One could be forgiven for thinking that the implication was that all countries south of the Sahara which had an AVU network partner university are similar. It is, of course, a truism to point out that this is totally incorrect. As mentioned above, while acknowledging that 'international business' has certain overarching principles and processes which need to form the basis for any course, strategies to draw on the knowledge of other AVU network partners have been designed into the Initiative plan in order that the course more truly reflects the cultural and business diversity of the region. This may range from the inclusion of a 'Muslim Banking' unit of study to the use of 'African' case studies in the instructional materials to the re-development of some units of study by the LPU. Clearly the content of the units of study provide varying degrees of difficulty when it comes to the contextualisation process with business law units providing a particular challenge.

Identification and selection of Lead Partner University (LPU)

The identification and selection of an LPU was a critical step in the project design process. The selection of Addis Ababa University as the LPU, unanimously recommended by the Curtin Project Design Team, is central and critical to the success of the Initiative outcomes. A key issue in choosing the LPU was to identify the institution that offered the best 'match' with Curtin's design to ensure the effectiveness of the project outcomes and to maximise the potential for the project's successful completion and subsequent sustainability. The criteria used to rank the appropriateness of the LPU for this proposal arose from the view of alliance/partnership management outlined above and were:

Resources

- human resources - strength of relevant faculty and administrative staff; gender issues; and
- physical resources - infrastructure for service provision, environment issues;

Institutional

- scope and quality of academic programs;

- match with Curtin profile;
- enthusiasm for the project;
- level and depth of institutional commitment; and
- status of planning and program review activities.

External

- previous interactions with AVU;
- AVU centre management and business planning; and
- demonstrated government commitment to the university and to technology capability building.

By ranking each of the LPUs against the above criteria, and following further discussion and reflection, the Project Design Team consensus was that Addis Ababa University provided the best fit with Curtin and the project.

Risk Management

Within the project design, a detailed risk management strategy was documented. Potential problems were identified and to the extent possible, solutions or strategies identified or developed that might anticipate or obviate the problems. Clearly the issues of capacity, connectivity and experience were the focus of this document. However issues such as cultural conflict and political instability also featured.

Lessons learned

As the Initiative is only in its infancy, it would be presumptuous of me to provide a definitive list of what has been learned - we are still very much learning - but some general principles and understandings confirmed so far are:

- (a) The need for an approach that can accommodate cultural differences to ensure they do not overshadow the potential benefits of the project;
- (b) Such an approach could emerge from a recognition that the key task of international online education partnerships is to facilitate the flow of communications and information (see Hawkins, 2000).
- (c) This presents a challenge to institutions to move beyond traditional views of knowledge (as objects to be owned) and embrace a view of knowledge as a process to be fostered (see Hanson, 2000).
- (d) Treating knowledge as a dynamic entity flowing between institutions in partnership enables creation of collaborative structures that enhance cultural diversity.
- (e) Several issues need to be addressed in setting up a communication-centred partnership. In particular, how can the communications between students and teachers be designed to foster cultural diversity? What constraints does information technology impose upon these relationships and communications? What are the impacts of these constraints? [See (van de

Bunt-Kokhuis, 2001); (Anon, 2000); (de Kloet).]

Curtin and its partners could not claim to have all of the answers, but we believe that initiatives like this can provide valuable experience from which others can learn and at least not make the same mistakes.

Conclusion

While not unique in the area of international ICT-based higher education, this initiative exemplifies a number of complexities not usually found in the more prevalent, commercially based activities. It differs in that:

- the collaborators are not necessarily at the same level of experience;
- the outcomes vary for each of the partners;
- it focuses on capacity building rather than exclusively income generation;
- it requires that student and institutional needs are met at a more fundamental level rather than the simple 'on-selling' of content to clients who have the appropriate infrastructure (technical and managerial) as a pre-requisite to being a partner;
- sustainability is an outcome to be developed not a pre-requisite for being a partner; and
- the returns to the various partners are not necessarily only financial.

Given that the formative stage of the initiative, there is much to do and many opportunities for failure. Indeed the negotiations which have brought the project thus far have, themselves, been a protracted learning experience. Never-the-less, the partners in the alliance have continued to communicate, plan the implementation, worked with each other, learned from each other and avoided re-inventing processes and products. Many of the assumptions which underpin the initiative design are yet to be tested. Our mistakes are being documented in order that we will not be repeated and we can understand them. Should the project falter for some reason, the relationships already developed have presented other opportunities which could be pursued.

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List of Acronyms used

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|--------|--|
| AVU | African Virtual University |
| AusAID | Australian Government Aid Agency |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| AAU | Addis Ababa University |
| LPU | Lead Partner University |
| AMC | Australian Managing Contractor |
| JCCC | Joint Curriculum Contextualisation Committee |
| BBA | Bachelor of Business Administration |
| CBS | Curtin Business School |
| SOLT | Standards for On-Line Teaching |
| QA | Quality Assurance |
| AMT | Activity Management Team |
| CAPAC | Curtin AVU Advisory Committee |
| LAM | Learning Management System |

Note

35. Within this paper, I would prefer to spell this term as e-Learning to emphasise the focus on learning rather than the ICT used to provide the learning opportunities to the students.