

ACTION: Africa Collaboration to Innovate Online (0275)

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Collaborative working is an established part of good practice in progressing pedagogical developments with staff and students on the local or global stage (Healey et al, 2014). Effective engagement requires trust, understanding of shared working practices and creative thinking within established quality boundaries to progress sustainable outcomes which satisfy individual expectations and organisational perspectives (Allin, 2014). These ingredients are particularly challenging when the collaboration crosses international borders with differing approaches in practice, style, language and culture (Gemmill et al., 2015).

The tension between academic rigour and quality on the one hand and the business dimension on the other often imposes restrictions or controls over what is 'marketable' or achievable in the geographies being targeted (BIS Green Paper, 2016). 'Freedom' and 'control' are interchangeable in building academically rigorous and rewarding staff and student teaching and learning experiences within the constraints of an affordable, marketable delivery model (academic freedom vs business realities). This articulates with other key collaborative drivers, for example, internationalization, access, equity of opportunities and of developing authentic learner journeys.

The University of South Wales (USW) and UNICAF have partnered in a flexible development initiative responding to anticipated growth in a range of disciplines in emerging African markets. This collaboration challenges, and is resolving, traditional obstacles to participation and equality in transnational higher education. The demand-led operation is resource efficient. Economies of scale derive from: technological innovations; ease of access to teaching and learning materials online (across mobile platforms); provision of robust student support mechanisms; student inclusion through authentic seamless representation; a scholarship scheme and building logistical and academic support centre hubs – all of which drive a sense of academic community, achievement and innovation in Higher Education that is

particularly suited to the challenges of capacity building in tertiary education in sub-Saharan Africa.

Recognising the need for greater innovation, creativity and ownership of the need for development, a different type of engagement approach has emerged; one which is based on the scholarship of learning and teaching to place developments into a practical context and heighten awareness of the benefits and impact from such change. Course leaders were identified as holding “knowledge translation” positions in subject areas as well as possessing subject-based learning and teaching experience. As such, they are in prime positions to promote, encourage and enable a greater sense of ownership of pedagogical ideals from individual and organisational perspectives based on the need to enhance staff and student experiences.

Central to this initiative has been the creation of a seamless ‘dialogue’ across the on-campus and virtual elements of the learning provision (Barton, D. et al., 2005).

An action learning set methodology has generated a collaborative cross-organisational community of practice which permeates through strategic management, Faculties, Corporate departments as well as being reflected in the teaching and learning methodologies through forum interactions and group work. This has enabled those with online teaching experiences to share best practices and critically discuss emergent issues in forging effective online teaching materials from resources originally intended to support on-campus provision (Wenger et al, 2002) This fits well with enhancing access and widening participation, while also linking effectively with ICP, DU and SE amongst others of the research domains. With such plentiful and varied data sets, there is considerable scope to ensure that we are able to explore different research methodologies to fully understand and assess qualitative and quantitative outcomes from this innovative international student feedback.

Involvement in this community is enabling a model for the enhancement of academic practice across the partnership to be developed with a strong in-built ethos of reflecting lessons learned in online learning to inform and change practice in on

campus learning and teaching situations and *vice versa* (Hughes, J. et al, 2007). Technology and its appropriate use in enhancing learning and teaching experiences are key in assuring appropriate 'fit for purpose' learning in relation to staff and students.

Reflecting the "knowledge translation" ideal, specific course leaders were identified to be involved in this innovative Partnership. These "change champions" were well placed within their subject based communities of practice through day-to-day experience of leading and managing pedagogic practices and their awareness of the opportunities and challenges presented by them. This community, with a wide range of experiences in learning, curriculum and research development, were not historically seen or, indeed, saw themselves as pedagogical leaders. This approach lead is to a richer, more embedded and wider range of outcomes with a higher profile of learning and teaching. As student learning becomes the major source of income to Universities, this community based success supports and assists the more strategic, cross-organisational developments in maximising the potential of learners. Enhancing the pedagogical leadership outlook and experiences of this management community raises the profile of learning and teaching across the University as well as increasing the confidence and capability in those in influential "change management" positions.

It is already very clear that this positive, innovative and fast-moving partnership demonstrates a strategic and operational meeting of minds. It offers substantial opportunities to further enhance learning and teaching practices to enrich traditional and online student experiences, and build bridges of learning to disadvantaged students seeking higher education opportunities in various worldwide economies, often under very challenging conditions.

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