Chapter 12
The Challenges and Opportunities of Partnership in Establishing Online Postgraduate Provision

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares some of the 'lessons learned' from the author's perspective of adopting a higher education services provider as partner for the design, development, and delivery of online postgraduate provision. Ultimately, partnering with a higher education services provider for the development of online learning offers distinct benefits in terms of marketing support, project management, and instructional design but the key to ensuring the partnership works effectively and impacts positively upon student experience, is to ensure a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities from the outset, avoid unnecessary shifts in personnel, and have a system of monitoring and control in place from the university's perspective to ensure that roles and responsibilities within the partnership are being upheld.

INTRODUCTION

Nottingham Trent University and specifically Nottingham Business School are increasingly regarded at the forefront of innovation within academia (The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide, 2018). This being ratified by a number of recent accolades and accreditations to include EQUIS and AACSB (The Guardian, 2018; Financial Times, 2018), and, most recently, The Guardian's University of the Year 2019. The University's strategic intent focuses upon 'creating the University of the future'. Two of the principles of this strategy seek to 'create opportunity' and 'connect globally'. A resultant action of pursuing these goals may be seen in the recent expansion of online learning, underpinned by a new structure which incorporates Flexible and Online Learning, viewed through the University's strategic 'Digital Lens'.

Over the numerous options available to an educational provider intending to establish online provision, the University selected to partner with a Higher Education Services provider, in order to contribute certain services to the partnership, to include; marketing, recruitment, project management and instructional design. The pilot programmes for this venture included three postgraduate programmes from three different academic Schools; an MBA, an Msc in Construction Project Management and MA in International Relations. There are some notable implications of this decision, both positively and negatively; with the key concern being the impact upon student experience.

Subsequently, this chapter considers the value of the relationship and shares experiences, particularly with regard to student experience. To do this, a qualitative, interpretivist approach was taken in which the author (who is also a programme leader) will draw upon in depth interviews with key stakeholders of the project in addition to various forms of student evaluation. It is hoped that by sharing these experiences, it will enable other academics and institutions, in a similar position, to make an informed choice regarding the benefits of partnership and collaboration for online learning development. To date, whilst there is a growing body of research from a pedagogical perspective that concerns the characteristics of online learning (Arbaugh, 2018), its challenges and its design (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Porter, 2015; Porter, Graham, Spring & Welch, 2014; Richey & Klein, 2014); there is an apparent lack of attention to the modes through which online learning can be established. Something that this research seeks to remedy.

BACKGROUND

Universities have been traditionally independent, and competitive (Hawkins, 2003). Whereas, distance learning institutions have traditionally been more cooperative and accommodating with partner institutions. Interestingly, Rubin (2003) has noted that "traditional universities are becoming more like distance learning universities and not the opposite" (p. 59). With this shift, more institutions are creating partnerships with other colleges, universities, companies, and other kinds of institutions to share technology and to produce and deliver courses (Carnevale, 2000c; Dunn, 2000; Cheney, 2002). However, partnerships present "obstacles as well as benefits. Winning accreditation, providing student services, setting tuition, figuring out finances, and transferring course credits are among the thorny issues that administrators find themselves struggling to face collectively" (Carnevale, 2000b, p. 2).

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