Chapter 6
Transnational Postgraduate Study for Development Workers:
Using Technology to Bridge the Gap

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ABSTRACT

This case describes social, technological, economic and political factors impacting on transnational learning in the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development program at the Australian National University. Using the experiences of students working in areas of conflict, poverty and injustice across the world, this case shows how flexible delivery of postgraduate education not only allows development workers to continue their career progression while remaining fully active in the field, but also enables them to engage in stimulating high-level discourse with their development practitioner peers as they apply theory to practice. Giving development workers the opportunity to engage in advanced study in a stimulating and peer-supported learning environment without leaving home both enriches their career functionality and long-term prospects, and enhances their day-to-day work activities. As a bonus, host communities benefit from a development worker with greater access to expertise, experience and support, and a reduced sense of professional and/or cultural isolation.

ORGANISATION BACKGROUND

The Australian National University (ANU) was established uniquely in Canberra by a Federal Act of Parliament in 1946. Consistently ranked highly internationally (Center for World-Class Universities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings), the

ANU is one of Australia's most research-intensive universities, with a focus on research-led teaching in both its undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Currently the University has about 14,000 students, including some 3,000 international students from 106 countries. As with all Australian higher education, tuition fees are charged for both domestic and international students. The ANU is essentially a single-campus university with a primary focus on face-to-face teaching, and—with notable exceptions

such as the Migration Law and Practice program; involvement in the Australia Global Development Learning Network; and the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development, which is the focus of this case—has only recently started to engage more widely with issues of flexible delivery and open learning.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Masters in Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development: Advanced Study for Development Professionals

Australia's geographic and sociopolitical context has given rise to a strong relationship with countries of the Asia-Pacific region. This includes a major focus on supporting development in many of those countries. ANU's teaching in development studies dates back to the establishment of the National Centre for Development Studies under the vision of Sir John Crawford, one of the leading development experts of the 1960s, and a strong advocate for high level teaching and research in development.

One of the foremost programs in ANU's development studies stable is the Master of Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development (MAAPD, http://rspas.anu.edu.au/maapd/). Established in 2002, this program focuses on the application of critical social inquiry and participatory processes to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development activities. It helps students explore how to combine social perspectives and participatory practices with other forms of technical expertise in development work. The MAAPD draws on the significant regional and conceptual expertise that contributes to ANU's world-class reputation in anthropological studies and development policy, with lecturers coming from specialist areas such as the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Research

School of Pacific and Asian Studies, and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. All eleven lecturers are active practitioners in the development field, so the MAAPD's practical focus on current issues is paramount.

The one year full-time-equivalent program—which offers a range of fifteen different courses—offers both a general program and optional specializations in 'gender and development', 'conflict and development', 'society and environment' and 'indigenous policy'. All students undertake core courses in social mapping and social impact, at least one advanced course in their specialization, and several electives. In educational terms, the program takes a strongly constructivist approach; students are encouraged and enabled to negotiate meaning in the context of their own experiences, and assessment is focused on real-life development problems (Cunningham, 1992; Mishra, 2002). The program's success is evidenced by testimonials from its alumni (MAAPD, 2009).

Cookson (2002) noted that the fastest-growing market sector in higher education is postgraduate education delivered online to people already working in the field of study. Professionals working on aid and development projects are among those who seek the benefits of postgraduate opportunities to engage in structured, critical reflection on their work, and to learn from their peers and specialists. Yet the dilemma of pursuing such study is clear: high quality programs in development studies are generally only available on-campus in universities in developed countries, so professional development generally comes at a high economic cost. Perhaps more important for many would-be students, however, and especially those working for non-government organizations, is the social and political cost of abandoning a specific development project and its associated community in order to study, a choice many aid workers are unwilling or unable to make.

Moreover, there are political and pedagogical tensions inherent in out-of-context teaching. Oxenham (1980, p.31) noted that institutions that teach

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