Chapter V
Opening Online Academic Development Programmes to International Perspectives and Dialogue

Catherine Manathunga
TEDI, University of Queensland, Australia

Roisin Donnelly
The Learning and Teaching Centre, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Professional development for academic staff in higher education is receiving increasing attention. The focus has been on providing an opportunity for academic staff to enhance their effectiveness in meeting changing needs and roles in higher education. Inherent in this changing role has been meeting the challenges of technology-infused learning environments available for use today. This chapter explores the potential of online academic development programmes to increase collaboration and dialogue amongst participants through integrating opportunities for online interaction. By spotlighting two particular postgraduate programmes in Ireland and Australia, the chapter reports on present experiences of integrating international guests and considers the future of connecting people and technology for academic development in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, there are increasing university and government pressures on academic staff to engage in professional development to improve their teaching and learning practices (Gibbs, 2004; Kezar, 2001; Knapper, 2004; Knight, 2002; McAlpine & Emrick, 2003). Demands are also

being placed on academic development units to enable staff to realise the potential of flexible modes of learning for their students. Many higher education institutions have adopted an e-learning strategy whereby academic development is at the forefront of promoting adoption of new technologies to support learning and teaching. The Dublin Institute of Technology's (DIT) strategic plan illustrates this:

The common objective, in all elements of the Strategic Plan, is the achievement of excellence, through processes of continuous improvement of staff and programmes…to develop modularized eLearning programmes…to foster career development for staff…to train staff to deliver web-based and other learning programmes to students internally and externally in Ireland. (DIT Institutional Strategic Plan, 2001-2015, pp. 15, 17, 19, 21)

So, too, in the Australian context, the University of Queensland's (UQ) Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan identifies "exploring new forms of educational interaction supported by information and communications technology" as part of its key goal of developing "flexible and engaging teaching practice," and commits the university to developing "a university approach to the support of Web-based teaching and learning materials and interactions" (UQ Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan, 2003-2007, p. 8). Delivering on these kinds of imperatives requires those in academic development units to be increasingly creative and open to new perspectives and collaborative opportunities.

This chapter first explores the impetus for the creation and implementation of online academic development programmes, paying specific attention to the small amount of scholarly discussion on incorporating international guests into these fora. The challenges of running international online development are linked theoretically to models of professional development specifically for blended learning (the combination of face-

to-face workshops and online learning activities and interaction). In particular, this chapter adapts Sharpe's (2004) professional development model for designing e-learning to these case studies. In order to set the scene for our experiences of involving international guests in our academic development programmes, the details of the contexts, curriculum design, and delivery of two diverse case studies are then presented. These case studies are in the fields of e-learning design and remote postgraduate supervision. In particular, we present evaluative data about these approaches based on a range of semistructured participant interviews from each programme over a period of 2 years. Finally, we discuss the implications of these teaching and learning strategies for academic development and for enhancing the international collaboration of academic developers. We also make some recommendations for future research directions.

THE IMPACT OF E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The pressure to embrace e-learning technologies in higher education has arisen from a number of factors beyond the mere availability of increasingly sophisticated technologies. Of particular importance have been the learning preferences and styles of the so-called Internet generation, also known as Net Gen or digital learners (Donnelly & O'Brien, 2003; Oblinger, 2006). The aptitudes, attitudes, expectations, and learning styles of these Net Gen students reflect the environment in which they were raised: one that is decidedly different from that which existed when academic staff were growing up (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). As Oblinger continues to argue, today's younger student learners are digital, connected, experiential, immediate, and social with preferences for learning that include peer-to-peer interaction and engagement and for learning resources that are visual and relevant. So, too, in

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