

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 6 of the book,
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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors.

Ch 6. Strategic alliances: collaboration for sustainability

A MULTILATERAL EXPERIENCE. INTERNATIONAL MASTER ON-LINE IN DRUG ABUSE

Introduction

If you are about to be involved in a multilateral on-line initiative, or after reading this case study you foresee doing so, you may find that some of your worries are not as uncommon as you thought. As I describe in the case study below, the obstacles may be numerous, but in most cases may be overcome.

This Case Study describes the story of an On-line Initiative that started from scratch and whose main results could be summarized as follows. In a nutshell, this Master:

- Is a **multilateral** project.
- Has achieved a high degree of **sustainability**.
- Has integrated in its development process **7 universities** from **5 different countries**, **1 government**, **1 international organization**, **35 teachers and professors**, **70 telematic tutors** and **16 administrative and technical staff**.
- Has enrolled **127 students** from **19 countries** and **52 provinces**.

In hindsight, if we were to start the project again, we would likely have dealt with some of the inexorable obstacles we faced in a very different way.

I have no doubt that this experience has been the result of the power of human imagination. It has come together with the proliferation of synergies of people that have invested their time in finding unconventional solutions to unconventional problems. This is not about technology, but about how to orchestrate solutions to social and training needs.

When it is time to materialize open and distance learning (ODL) techniques in concrete environments, there are various schools and theories. The methodology applied in this project was the one used at that time by the UNED (National Distance University of Spain). For any of the situations encountered while developing this project, we found different managerial solutions. There were many other ways that we could have managed this project; this is the one we have tested that worked. While we are aware that

there is a long way to go on this initiative, we have enjoyed some of the very first fruits of this sort of alliance.

What motivated the formation of the partnership?

This project is the brainchild of Dr. Yolanda Marquez, of Venezuela. Despite her age and physical limitations, Dr. Marquez has shown us that there is no such thing as being pre-technology. As with all initiatives, the idea emanates from an individual that dares to dream about it. This project found its way to the Organization of the American States (OAS) through the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD).

Based on Dr. Marquez's vision and the multitude of international mandates, the OAS analyzed the different courses offered throughout the hemisphere, at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, that in one way or another were aimed at training personnel who deal with the drug problem. The results showed that only a few institutions offered limited training possibilities. Two main questions brought us all together a few months later:

- How could we open those possibilities to a larger number of professionals without making them abandon their working and personal environments?
- How could we join together all the necessary experts and teachers (working in Spanish) and create a full Master degree?

The OAS called on a few institutions to work together to find an answer. The institutions invited were those that already offered a Master in Drug Abuse or similar degrees. After a few meetings they created a network named UNIREDDROGAS (www.unireddrogas.org). Additionally, the OAS contacted a few universities with experience in Open and Distance Learning. The UNED was the institution selected to lead the process of implementing an ODL methodology.

What strengths did each partner bring to the relationship? How did you find one another?

Each institution involved brought together the diversity and knowledge that the project required at that time. The universities included:

- *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* (Spain). Technological Partner. Public University.
- *Universidad de Deusto* (Spain). Private University.
- *Universidad Miguel Hernández* (Spain), Public University.
- *Fundación Universitaria Luis Amigó* (Colombia).
- *Universidad Federico Villareal* (Peru).
- *Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia* (Peru).
- *Universidad Estatal de Educación a Distancia UNED* (Costa Rica).
- *Universidad Nacional Experimental Simón Rodríguez* (Venezuela).

Other institutions involved:

- Department of the Interior (*Plan Nacional sobre Drogas*) of Spain.

- OAS through the CICAD

What did each member hope to gain? What is the overall goal of the partnership?

Some significant issues brought us all together:

1. An existing and urgent training demand
2. A vibrant content potential
3. A learning environment where we could combine efforts and experiences
4. A lack of resources in order to create a multidisciplinary master. No institution by itself could organize what the group was capable of offering
5. Quality standards and institutional cost effectiveness criteria

What initial steps did you take to formalize the partnership?

After a few small scale meetings, aimed at designing a structure for the future Master Degree, a well defined proposal was presented to the partners. Some important decisions were reached at that point.

- Each institution would be represented in the network by two persons: the legal representative (President), and the academic coordinator. This simple resolution was a key factor. Without this institutional and academic support, we could not have accomplished anything on time.
- Each university would ensure that the future certificate or degree would be given by the institution.
- The Virtual Platform to be used would be the one used by the UNED (WebCT at that time). The vast majority of commercial platforms at that time offered similar tools. Only a few years later we realized that it would have worked better if we had used a more collaborative platform. This is something we are working on.
- Each institution would propose a certain number of professors and teachers.
- Two teachers would be assigned to each subject of the Master. In order to guarantee that the Master was truly international, it was agreed that each of the two teachers assigned to the subject would be from a different university and country, preferably one from each side of the Atlantic.
- We agreed to not just provide a CD-Rom to the students and forget about the rest of the learning process... Rather the Master would be based on the use of telematic tutors. These tutors would be appropriately trained by the UNED staff in the use of the Platform.

Once we had the basic strategy designed, what came first?

In order to select the personnel for the Master, we used one of the tools of a normal platform, the chat. This also allowed everyone to become familiar with this tool. We all agreed that the maximum number of teachers per credit

would be two (maximum of three in some research modules). Each institution sent the rest of the institutions the resumes of their candidates and, as if it were a mere competition to win a prize, the “countries” cast their votes through a chat. They all saw and tested the procedure and the way a simple tool, when correctly used and directed, could avoid much of the “noise”. The candidates who received the most votes (pursuant to geographic and balance criteria), became the academic staff of the Master.

After signing a Framework Agreement amongst the partners, we proceeded with the training phases, consisting of three major courses (combining virtual and face-to-face training), some of which were implemented simultaneously. The goal was to train 35 teachers, 70 tutors and 16 assistants.

When executing a project, there is always a methodological question. In this case, the question was: are we transforming an expert on drug prevention into a computer expert, or are we providing the necessary tools and support so that he/she can transform content into a particular format?

We chose the second option. It is important to find a way to encourage your teachers to become more active in the virtual process, without becoming computer experts. An institution cannot afford to lose one teacher because of a lack of participation. Therefore, we asked every institution to select one of their students to become a technological assistant. Fortunately, at the UNED, we have addressed similar situations with more than a thousand teachers. We gave some recommendations: when selecting your technological assistant, try to find a young student who is familiar with the vocabulary of the content, and has some IT skills.

The three groups to be trained were:

- Teachers: To be able to adapt their contents into a virtual environment and, moreover, into a distance environment.
- Assistants: To prepare a first group of assistants who would support those teachers in transferring the information into a didactic and virtual environment.
- Telematic Tutors: To train tutors (Teachers and/or health sector professionals may act as tutors), in the use of the platform.

What did you think would result from the partnership and how did that change over time?

There was one simple issue that could have made the project fail--the lack of generosity in sharing knowledge and experience. Our biggest fear was institutional phagocytosis. However, we faced no conflict at all. Rather, every person involved believed that this was an institutional and team project and, therefore, no one claimed to be more important than the other.

What obstacles did you encounter?

- Certification. How to make all institutions certify this master when they contribute with a minimum amount of teachers.
- Use of existing funds in order to guarantee the project sustainability.
- Leadership and future activities.
- Human Resources involved in the project. Did we involve too many people?
- Student Support
- Exams

What unintended consequences resulted (both good and bad)? How would you have done things differently (if you would have)?

I believe it is important to analyze each of these obstacles so we can see their consequences and how we could have approached things differently in order to avoid them.

Certification

Each institution has its own regulations; each country establishes certain national criteria that are out of the university's control. We were talking about a complicated degree implemented by 7 different universities. In the very beginning, the whole idea of a joint degree was out of the question... but we still pursued something similar.

As we worked in developing the courses, each institution started their own internal process to submit the degree to the appropriate regulation procedures. Each university followed national rules and deadlines. In this regard, we should say that the presidents of each institution, in general terms, played a decisive role in assuming an institutional risk by not stopping the project until the process was complete. That risk lessened as the OAS committed itself to the project by providing a political and institutional umbrella.

As a result, each institution certified the Master Degree under their regulations. Each student would apply at one and only one institution, and that institution would provide the official certificate. We agreed that 25 would be the maximum number of students for each university, unless it was otherwise agreed by the whole network.

Economic aspects

The economic value of this Master was 2,000 USD per student. This was not intended to be an elite degree but rather a possibility for professionals throughout Latin-America, a social need indeed.

We considered that a minimum of 87 students per year would guarantee the project's sustainability. It was agreed that a bank account would be opened for the project at the OAS in Washington, D.C. The students would pay the tuition at that account (to avoid certain obstacles raised in some countries to

paying in USD) and the OAS, according to an agreement signed by each university, would distribute the funds to every university accordingly. It was also agreed that there would be a compensation fund created with a percentage of that “income”, to allow us to deal with any unbalanced situation or need. Additionally, the *Fundación Educúredito* Foundation in Venezuela created a fund, an *Educúredito*, which would be offered to some students as a very low interest loan. This helped out 20 students, and is generating extra funds for the next year, when we expect this system to be shared with other countries and, therefore, to achieve further institutional and enterprise commitment.

Once again, if we were starting this project today, we would have probably obtained more institutional commitment from the universities involved so they would guarantee certain enrolment per year in order to be part of the network.

Leadership

We managed to organize a rotative system in which every year, one university president would be the institutional leader of the network. That academic component of leadership was fully covered. But we made the mistake of believing that the international organization would be in the project forever.

The network is currently working on creating a permanent Secretariat that would deal in an executive manner with an international project of this complexity.

Human Resources

A total of 70 tutors were trained for this Master On-line. The initial forecast of enrollment was 200 students. The current ratio of Tutor/Student in order to guarantee a certain level of quality is 1 tutor/30 students maximum. If the Masters Enrollment was 200 and there are 11 modules, it brings us to 2,200 students. By having 70 tutors, we guarantee 2,100 students, which covers almost the whole prevision.

Including so many tutors at the very beginning, was an obvious mistake. What considerations did we miss?

- What happens if we do not enroll the expected number of students? What happens if we just enroll a few more than 87? What do you do with the rest of the tutors that you no longer need? Do you lose all that professional investment?
- The modules and credits are not simultaneous. That could easily allow for fewer tutors during the academic year
- Some of the tutors are also teachers of the Master. We could have taken advantage of this duality until we confirmed the actual enrollment.

Student Support

We are facing a Master where students from 19 different countries attend. We have found some differences in the level of tutoring the students receive in one country or another. There are various economic, geographical and social divergences and the policy to deal with all of them should have been more precise in accordance to their circumstances. It is not the same to deal with a student in Bogotá, as in the Amazon Forest or Madrid. No doubt we could have addressed this issue much better in the beginning of the process rather than in the middle of it. Still, each university provides its own degree... and it is rather difficult to interfere in this university-student relationship.

Exams

This is one of the successes of this Project. We all agreed that a physical face-to-face exam would take place. In that exam, every student would present personal identification. A final exam was understood as a must for this project.

We articulated a whole network of locations where students would attend at a certain time and date. The virtual platform had an exam programmed for that day and, therefore, all students had a computer available in a secure and identified location. We agreed on using the OAS Regional Offices, the UNED Centers, Embassies, Consulates, University Campuses, and others...