

An innovative delivery of foundation degrees; but not without its problems!

Abstract

This observational study explores the trials and tribulations of developing a work based Foundation Degree (FD) in Travel Operations Management in association with two other HEI's, employers and related organisations. It is delivered on-line using Pebble Pad technology and supported by a face to face induction with ongoing email and telephone tutorials. Whilst a first cohort of 60 students is now enrolled and progressing with their first modules, it has not been an easy two year developmental journey. The process has highlighted a number of difficulties including resources in planning and developing on line learning materials (both the materials themselves, the costs of technical expertise and ongoing Technology Supported Learning (TSL) training). In addition agreeing the programme regulations (including the size of modules); agreements in financial arrangements between employers and the HEI partners (each of which have different rates of pricing for FD); preparing industry personnel for their mentoring and coaching roles and changing personnel in supporting organisations contributed to the issues. Finally ensuring compliance with sector skills organisations who have not yet written their FD frameworks; industry partners frustration in timely decision making processes through the complicated list of personnel involved in agreeing decisions at different strategic levels of the university structures contribute to periods of frustration. By sharing these experiences the authors hope to prevent future problems that may arise in innovative developments.

Key Words

Foundation Degrees; Travel Operations Management; TSL;

Introduction

In the aftermath of the governments drive for 'new, innovative awards at sub-degree level' launched in 2000, the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) began strategic development of foundation degrees (FD) based on the widening participation agenda. It has developed some 25 programmes across a wide range of subject areas. Most of these were developed in conjunction with college partners, some with employers and a few exist within the universities core business. At the vanguard of all such development were the core FD themes: work based learning, partnerships in curriculum development and opportunities for development to honours degrees.

LALIM (the Department of Leisure and Lifestyle Industries Management) had responded to the university strategy by developing a Foundation Degree (Arts) Professional Licensed Retailing to complement their undergraduate curriculum in hospitality. In its development they had worked with an HEI partner, Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU), employers and relevant organisations. In doing so they had developed an expertise in FD development that was inclusive in terms of the potential stakeholders and innovative in design and delivery (Wiscombe, 2005). LALIM were cognisant that the embryonic partnership with LMU could, and possibly should, have been consolidated into a formal recognition of the work done together.

For the academic year 2005-06 the Department of Leisure and Lifestyle Industries (LALIM), or Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality as it was then known, was challenged to investigate if there was a potential market for a Foundation Degree in tourism, or tourism related sector, which would balance their portfolio and encourage more learners into the B.A. (Hons) Tourism Management programme. The strategy behind the potential programme would be to enable LALIM to remain competitive in a challenging environment where enrolled numbers in traditional taught tourism programmes were in decline.

An innovative method of delivery could attract a new cohort where workplace buy-in would challenge the existing market in small short courses and CPD (Continual professional development) programmes (whether in-house or externally delivered). Success of such a

programme would provide further curriculum development of top up routes to honours awards, and provide experienced professionals lacking in formal qualifications a lever into MA/MSc or MBA routes. Potentially a FD in a tourist sector could represent better value for money and provide stronger recognition with employers than CPD awards and unlike short courses provides a longevity of study which can provide a staff retention tool - it links to a potential two year buy in for staff. Finally the expertise which LALIM had previously developed showed them that the qualification would enable staff to look outside their current employment focus to see the external marketplace in which the organisation operates. In addition they would see the bigger picture, often including the competitors, and allow the use of theoretical tools to provide competitive advantage amongst both operational and supervisory staff. (This became a key driver in ensuring the first cohort of learners sponsored by TUI UK.)

The outcome has been a sector specific FD (Arts) Travel Operations Management delivered equally by three HEI's, Coventry University (CU), Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies (BCFTCS) and University of Wolverhampton, under the umbrella brand UKTEP (United Kingdom Travel Education Partnership). It is pertinent to say that UKTEP and LALIM had striven that any partnership would be equally owned and operated however the validated award belongs to the University of Wolverhampton. Student numbers belong to LALIM (the University of Wolverhampton), whilst the HEI's will share any fees and funding.

This observational case study follows the developmental journey of the FD (Arts) Travel Operations Management programme and aims to highlight some of the issues that an innovative product developed with a partnership approach uncovers. Undoubtedly the validity of the paper is affected by the position of the narrator and is influenced by the ontological spin of the authors (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). To counteract these effects the principal author, the Head of Department of LALIM, has encouraged the involvement of staff that joined the department post-validation of the FD. They can question participants, interrogate paperwork and encourage analysis of the data set with a less biased perspective.

Participant observational research is however also in nature 'deceitful' (Ditton, 1977). This study justifies its methodology by ensuring that instead of looking at the behaviour of the participants on an individual basis, that is often the focus of observational research, the study remains focused on the process of the development (Veal, 1997). To secure an ethical approach to the paper the authors have sought clearance from the department research group, ensured 'UKTEP' membership approval, and gained sanction from the SPAL ethics committee as "ethical issues frequently arise from a clash between personal and professional interests" (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002).

The Developmental Process

In June 2005 the University of Wolverhampton gave the undergraduate Course Leader for the Tourism and Hospitality programmes at School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure (SSPAL), a remit to investigate the possibility of developing a Foundation Degree in Tourism. This would balance the portfolio in LALIM, as the department had a FD in the hospitality sector but not in Tourism. The first investigations were with local colleges with whom LALIM explored the market in the local economies of the West Midlands. Colleges included Telford College of Arts and Technology and City of Wolverhampton College. The results of this general enquiry were not positive. By September 2005, little had been achieved and a marketplace was not defined.

In September 2005 a careers event was organised for undergraduates in LALIM to which a number of employers were invited. One of these employers was TUI UK and the Funded Scheme Manager, who had been with the company only six months, arrived to represent them. Post event discussions highlighted TUI interest in Foundation Degrees as an exciting development to which TUI could definitely commit. Part of that interest was the opportunity TUI might have to APL (accredit prior learning) from their own in-house training, a feature of the departments APEL processes. This was subsequently built into the validation, but eventually became an area where TUI became least enamoured because they wanted students to have the benefit of looking outside the organisation to add value to the business

and contribute to business improvements. The fact that learners who may now be mature but had been with the company since they were 18 yrs old could now engage with a process that allowed them to have their skills and experience validated externally was not a process that would benefit from the APL process. The validation work on mapping is not totally obsolete as it helped to contribute to understanding the needs of personal development within the business and in addition has enabled one student on the pilot to gain some APL against the programme.

TUI interest meant LALIM awoke to the possibility that they had been thinking too small and despite previous nationally recognised programme development, was regionally biased. A national standard of programme supported by large employers might bring them the numbers of students they needed to really support department recognition for their undoubted expertise, develop further their honours programme and progression to postgraduate levels. They also knew from previous research that they needed the support of professional bodies, sector related organisations, skills councils and a wide ranging employer base to ensure that the final product would be fit for a wider audience. Employers engaged in the development included Birmingham Airport, Carlson Waggonlit Travel, Harvey World Travel, Hays Travel, Personal Service Travel Ltd, Co-op Travel, My Travel Group PLC and TUI UK. Birmingham Airport and TUI UK attended many of the developmental meetings with other employers either attending or contributing via email review. Other contributors were the Institute of Travel and Tourism and Jane Armitage Associates.

Wide ranging debate ensued within and external to LALIM to ensure that any meeting held would gain the respect of the industry and the expertise to ensure all avenues of development were explored. In addition initial meetings with TUI showed LALIM that they might not have all the subject specific skills needed to develop a programme for the travel operations sector. As before partnerships were discussed. Where previous FD development work had been done in partnership with LMU but finally gone their separate ways, LALIM knew that here was an opportunity to really develop a new route to success. The advantages of creating a partnership of HEI's working together on an innovative programme were not only subject specific however. The sharing of the resource burden in developing a TSL led distance learning programme cannot be underestimated. Alone the University of Wolverhampton would not have been able to achieve the development of the module content and the transferring of this to either a virtual learning environment or eportfolio context. The results of the collaboration have been felt in other ways; the most recognised is the different management contribution to the development, both in perspectives and styles.

Thus LALIM worked to bring interested parties, including HEI's who might be able to help develop such a programme, more employers such as Birmingham Airport and Coop Travel, and, following the pattern of previous FD development in the department, ensured both professional bodies and sector skills councils were invited. At the same time TUI were speaking at employer led meetings with People 1st and Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) and generating interest in a wide ranging project which would enable a national standard programme to be achieved.

FdF "provides a national network of expertise in FD development, by creating opportunities and good practice" and, key at this point to the future of what became UKTEP, "provides a service to establish partnerships amongst stakeholders", (Maguire, 2005). At this initial stage it would have been easy to allow a lack of resources in project management to detract from early impetus. Moreover realising the potential of a nationally recognised FD for the travel sector combined with the innovative scope of what became three HEI's working together FdF indicated their willingness to fund a project co-ordinator for an interregnum period to enable the project to move forward. A complication arose in that the inaugural group asked that the Course Leader (CL) from UoW take up this work however her role at UoW was then limited to only three days per week and the department needed her teaching commitment to continue. UoW could therefore not afford to release the CL within her current contract. Directly with the support of the then Dean of School therefore negotiation took place so that employment for an extra day per week to fulfil the FD project period with a reporting mechanism directly back to FdF was ensured.

By the completion of the contract, initial production and ongoing development of the course proposal outline, an extensive employer engagement, review and feedback had been undertaken and the processes of validation engaged. In addition the co-ordinator ensured that the project partners carried out actions from meetings. These included meeting with QCA to receive their endorsement for a partnership delivery arrangement moreover “the alignment and discharge of appropriate quality assurance systems” were well advanced (Dewhurst, 2006). The project did not include programme document development or validation work, which was undertaken at the end of the initial project period.

The most innovative piece of work during this period was the establishment of what an employer meant by a graduate of a FD. The skills, knowledge, understanding that might be expected from the learner on completion of the programme. In this way all other aspects (module title, module content, and programme outcomes) could be developed with all the parties in no doubt as to what they would achieve. The drawing on the flip chart of the graduate, with all their constituent attributes, was an undoubted maturity of earlier enhancements used in the FD (Arts) Professional Licensed Retailing development. In terms of curriculum content it became sensational; articulate and easily communicable.

By the end of the funded project in July 2006 the HEI partners were committed to validate during the ‘autumn term’ 2006-2007. In addition a quantifiable market had been established. However between July 2006 and actual validation in May 2007 involved a huge amount of work funded by each of the HEI partners. It was a period of the process not without its difficulties.

One aspect of this was in the level of personnel involved from each HEI. At University of Wolverhampton the process was being driven ‘bottom up’. The department had been challenged to investigate and was resourcing the development. At CU the Head of Applied Management who became the Head of Strategy and Applied Management, a substantial ‘division’ was involved whilst BCFTCS contribution came from the Director of School. For the CL at UoW this meant a constant relaying back on progress, requirements and updates, often needing answers to queries from department head, school executive or elsewhere in the university. It became a frustrating though exhilarating challenge to drive forward the development. This may have differed for each HEI as operationalising of the modules happened much later in the process for CU and BCFTCS with their strategy developing through the partnership. LALIM had the strategy but the operationalisation was to the fore. Nevertheless LALIM struggled for the programme to reach fruition. During August, September and October 2006 barriers were certainly created by the level of personnel involved in the discussions at the early stages. This meant continuous discussion of the complicated processes (regulation, finance, credit load) and reiteration of these to enable the focus of the work to be taken up through the university levels in order to reach agreements with the other HEI’s rather than focussing on the validation documentation. This became frustrating for the employer and the partnership per se.

Operational decisions were necessary about the type of programme required. Whilst distance learning was the obvious necessity for an employer such as TUI, though not quite so important for Birmingham Airport, the delivery mechanism was more hotly debated. Workbooks from other distance learning programmes were utilised to try to ensure that the best of good practice was used BUT the overarching demand was for TSL. Elliot and Smith (2005) provided a good grounding in some of the challenges to be faced in looking at on-line education but their journey began in producing an on-line programme from an existing development. UKTEP started with a blank screen. In addition the models from distance learning provided an opportunity to reflect and evaluate learning. At Oxford Brooks this was developed by using ‘ponder points’ for their MBA Hospitality programme whilst for ILM a section of the text was given over to reflection and review.

Key to choosing the TSL method was that the ‘dialogue between user and peers and between learner and tutor’ (Lewis and Whitlock, 2003) was vital. UKTEP knew that the learner was key. Recruitment of the learner would be driven by the employer who would sanction the application to UKTEP based on their appraisal, manager’s recommendation or in house training programme development. UKTEP also considered that “any particular learner, in a

particular learning situation is likely to exhibit different capabilities and preferences” (Knowles et al, 2005). Nevertheless andragogy’s accepted principles should provide UKTEP with learners who are autonomous, ready to learn, and motivated to learn whilst their goals for learning might differ from that of the employer. The TSL medium had however to be accessible.

The learner then was placed at the heart of the programme planning and the technology had to be available. Both hardware and software considerations were made and this linked with debate on how much time would be given by the employer for learning (Lewis and Whitlock, 2003) The University of Wolverhampton already used two TSL mediums a Virtual Learning Environment, WOLF, and an eportfolio, Pebble:

- Wolf: A repository for teaching notes with facilities for interactive questionnaires, discussion forums and WebQuests.
- Pebble: individual space assigned to the student where they can develop their own WebFolios, CVs, action plans and Blogs (which also work as discussion forums) and students can store images, and content.

The other universities were either using Blackboard or were developing new TSL strategies that allowed them to consider wider choices. In order to provide students with TSL the medium had to be well supported with technical expertise and to develop materials the tutors had also to be well trained. One of Pebbles’ advantage was that it developed by UoW but it is also currently *“used by over 120,000 students in over forty institutions across the UK”* (Thomas, 2007).

Pebble complies with all accessibility regulations and is compatible with screen readers. Pebble provides a range of integrated tools to assist students in managing their study-related activities, and could be used to monitor progress within the context of the materials being used. It is this duplicity of use and the fact Pebble is established in many HEIs for use as a staff development tool even where it is not used as a student VLE that would also help to reduce the risks to new partnerships joining UKTEP in the future. The decision was not an easy one to take but Pebble helped to provide ensure traceable submission for distance learners, a vital component of distance learning programmes (McDonald, 2006).

The needs of distance learners needed to be considered in the development of the awards delivery mechanisms and in personal tutor support. McDonald (2006) argues that ‘Students not on campus may need greater flexibility in their study routines.....such students rely traditionally on an asynchronous study environment in which content is delivered through self study materials, and tutor mediated support takes place through correspondence tuition supplemented with occasional face to face tutorials or telephone conversations’. In addition introducing the technology was an important aspect of the programmes development. McDonald (2006) further suggested that the learner would not be comfortable with the elearning until they became familiar with it. She additionally includes both the medium and the group in her discourse

Originally the programme had determined that it should be able to be delivered without ever meeting the student but the course team, along with the employer, decided a face to face induction to the systems and materials would enable learners to interact with both the cohort group and the technology. Whilst the lack of control over engagement with the learning materials is one aspect of further study by the pilot team the opportunities for collaboration between the study group and peer support seem to indicate that most students engage with the materials. Personal tutoring concerns, again still under current scrutiny in the pilot cohort, are taking a much more proactive role than in on-campus programmes with an email transaction on a minimum of a monthly basis to each tutee. Tutors are feeding in the results to the course leader in order to track attrition or disengagement at an early stage and put together an intervention strategy between the triangulate of course leader, module leader and employer. The personal tutor thus provides the catalyst for communication but to accommodate this resource-heavy approach the team has spread the personal tutor role widely across LALIM. The engagement of the programme with more than just the module team has had the beneficial result of enabling the changing of culture toward the ‘innovative

differences' of blended learning approaches. Those who might have feigned indifference to it have not been able to.

Finally the validation panel at University of Wolverhampton always insists on a standardised course guide in hard copy as part of the paperwork submitted. The course team had been anticipating putting the materials necessary on-line. McDonald (2006) deliberates on the medium with which course guides should be given; clear messages are essential whatever the mechanics of delivery and students would benefit from clear structure and schedule. In finalising and testing the university standard versions the pilot team were aware that there was much more information that an on campus students may need. The end results are now being updated following initial feedback from students to ensure the clarity of the messages.

Work based learners would always need support from a mentor in the organisation. "A formal structure is essential because it provides meaning and direction for relationships and support where necessary Clutterbuck, 2001, p15 " however it is also argued that "individual relationships will flourish best when allowed to operate as informally as possible" (ibid). The project team had provided a coaching and mentoring guidance 'pack' for use within the organisation largely based on work in University of Wolverhampton Business School. During the early stages of the pilot in conjunction with the employer of the first cohort, a more formal mentoring 'toolkit', which builds on the best aspects of formal and informal mentoring schemes, was decided upon (Wallace and Gravell, 2006). This 'toolkit' will provide the student with mentors who will use a varying mix of coaching-mentoring (Joy 2006), instrumental-developmental and formal-informal approaches depending on their experience, skill, relationship to the mentee and stage and task to which they are providing support. This approach to mentoring was informed by educational and industrial mentoring and coaching theory and practice. This is intended to directly match and inform the characteristics of the collaboration of industry and academia, as is represented by the dynamics of a work based foundation degree. It is anticipated that this 'toolkit' will cover most support needs and have the potential to aid retention and achievement. In addition it will support the "cross fertilisation between different styles and application of mentoring particularly across the business, education and community sectors" (Clutterbuck 2001, p15). A research project to investigate the success of the approach is already underway and already shows that strong relationships exist between tutors and or the course leader and some of the students. How this impacts on the programmes success will be published in due course.

To say that 'regulations, delivery mechanisms and indeed content was duly developed and agreed between the parties' which resulted in the validation meeting in May 2007 would be to underestimate the achievement. The pilot project continues to modify this flexible and modular programme. The addition of study days, not anticipated originally, detailed coaching and mentoring guidance for industry mentors, as well as the challenge provided by continuing to engage the high standard of learners on the award continues to test the delivery and support team.

In addition the expertise within LALIM is continually needed to promote stakeholder engagement with the award. This is vital as the employers knew that to become a valuable qualification that was nationally recognised the final version should be seen as the 'blue ribbon standard' by the sector skills council. It should be noted, and is vitally important to UKTEP, that People 1st, unlike other sector skills councils had not written and, as yet have not finalised, their FD frameworks. This meant that UKTEP had to be even more certain that their product was as employers might expect so that the framework would eventually endorse the work undertaken.

Between validation and delivery personnel have changed within the partner HEI's and in those who would administer the FD. This would be unavoidable in most institutions but at two of the three partners this was caused by the process set up itself. Engaging with the pilot team, rather than the strategists, at an earlier stage in the process might have made transition easier. In the third case key players leaving could have caused a more serious hiatus however the speedy engagement of dynamic and motivated staff combined with the commitment to a smooth 'hand over' meant the disruption was kept to a minimum. In all programme development, but particularly innovative delivery mechanisms, a team of

integrated players would enable a better transitional phase if staff were to change role or leave.

Since September 2007 UKTEP have admitted, enrolled and inducted 60 students on the programme, all employees of TUI UK, using two of the three campuses. They have developed the materials for each module in the programme and modified the first, early draft versions used at the validation event. A second cohort is expected in March. The second cohort will enable the refinement of processes and procedures and will allow UKTEP to complete a cyclical evaluation of the pilot. FdF have funded further UKTEP developments thus allowing TUI £72,000 in fee remission. This allows the 60 students to complete year one of the programme at a nil cost to TUI. This helps to repay them for the huge amount of effort and work that they have done to develop the consensus of what constitutes a FD (Arts) Travel Operations Management graduate. UKTEP are still to receive income to provide any cost benefit for the project.

The Innovative Product

Fleming and Cantwell (2005) argued that innovative practice on a foundation degree might include the use of information and communication technologies, blending of tutor delivered and remote study and teaching, learning and assessment that are underpinned by subject based and pedagogic research, as well as other possible factors. The FD (Arts) Travel Operations Management (FD TOM) is by this definition an innovative product. It is delivered using Pebblepad, an eportfolio, in a largely distance learning environment, as an equal partnership by three higher education institutions (HEI).

Currently a pilot scheme is in operation to test out the individual parts of the programme (from applications to delivery and from progression to support needs). Each section of the award is 'prepared' for reconfiguration according to student, tutor and employer feedback in association with subject, pedagogic and employer developments. In itself this is innovative and does not wait for the 'annual monitoring process' or 'external examiner commentary' to change its foci.

The pilot project provides the following commentary: -

Application & Enrolment Process

240 students were considered by TUI for enrolment on the programme. 60 students were put forward and they had to complete a University of Wolverhampton application form in order to fulfil the process. This method has suited the pilot well, ensuing a motivated committed cohort, although formal entry requirements, including the need to be employed in the industry, also exist for applicants once the course has broadened its reach.

Induction Process

Although designed as a distance-learning course there was a clear need expressed by the employer to ensure students have the opportunity to 'experience' university. In addition the occasion to have some face-to-face time was also valuable. On this basis students were asked to attend a compulsory 2-day induction at University of Wolverhampton. Logistics showed that more than one event would be needed to accommodate the cohorts work commitments and a second opportunity for induction was provided at Coventry University. A further two students were provided with a third session at the University of Wolverhampton. The employer supported each event, providing accommodation and sustenance. The objectives of the induction programme were:

- To introduce students to study at H.E. level and to explain procedures and systems
- To provide training on PebblePad and to explain how to use other electronic resources

- To introduce the content of the first year modules and to clarify what was required within the assessments
- To ensure students could meet their personal tutors, the course & module leaders and other key LALIM staff

Feedback from each session was evaluated fully in order to inform future induction sessions. Although students left feeling less 'scared' of higher education a number were also concerned about how they would cope with the technology and course requirements once they were balancing work, study and leisure time. It was made clear at the induction that ongoing technical, tutorial and topic support would be available, and that there was a strong internal process being developed within their organisation to support and develop a mentoring scheme. (Some fascinating blogs were sent to personal tutors during this period which provided key messages in motivation, dynamics and considerations for the future of the programme).

Course Delivery

Decisions on the method of delivery had already taken place but since validation of the programme exciting developments have been included. At validation Pebble was already into stage 2 development, although the module development thus far had been on the original model. The lack of functionality in comparison to Wolf (the University of Wolverhampton VLE) would be reduced as Pebble 2 was developed and the course team have been proactive in adopting the new technology. Key features of Pebble 2, launched in time for the first cohort of students, include:

- Improved creation of visually interesting work.
- Full back up for student work
- Extensive pedagogic research within the department
- Full Pebble 'Gateways' allowing verification of assessment submission

As identified the course uses PebblePad for all learning materials and for submission of student work but any good VLE requires a perfected use and application of the system. To achieve this and to reduce the risk of students losing touch with the techniques there needs to be an appropriate lesson format.

Using this assumption the course content is broken down into 'lesson size chunks', between 10 and 12 sessions per module with informal tasks, plus an introductory section with assessments for download. The module also includes a full module guide. Lessons develop in difficulty as students build up knowledge of relevant theories and concepts and start to acquire the necessary research and writing skills. All the tasks are structured to ensure students are aware of how long should be spent on each session with guideline times, length of writing or quantity of research that should be achieved. This has proven valuable in ensuring students did not waste unnecessary time on the activities set. Students are already commenting on the time taken to complete tasks and one module is already progressing to minor modification in order to ensure that the pedagogic approach to testing learning outcomes is both work related and achieved within the appropriate timescale.

Student Progress, Retention and Achievement

Students are currently working on their first two modules. 'Employability Skills' is written so that it supports and introduces students to the academic level of work required for University study, and therefore has sessions on Research Methods, using journals and accessing databases, as well as written and verbal communication. 'Understanding the Business' ensures that students are working with familiar, if underdeveloped, subject specific knowledge.

All modules are written with a number of tasks students need to complete and share with tutors or module leaders to ensure they understand the topic. These are formative

in nature and help develop information needed to complete the assessments for the modules.

Students have been very good at sending examples of work and informal tasks to their tutor or course leader for feedback and have received feedback promptly. The standard of work has been very good.

Results from modules will form part of a retention and progression analysis against traditional undergraduate student data nevertheless current analysis shows equivalent retention statistics (withdrawals quote both personal and work related issues. These are being investigated).

Student Support

Each student has been allocated a personal tutor. Currently these are located within LALIM with each member of the team having an equal number of students. A proactive approach to tutoring is taking place with tutors emailing their students on a minimum of a monthly basis in order to counteract any retention issues. This is currently being closely monitored to see its effectiveness. In time, and as the cohort grows in number, it is planned to share personal tutoring across the delivering institutions. Phone appointments have proved invaluable where students have needed step by step help. Future opportunities exist here to Podcast the step by step tutorial.

Outside the University structures a number of students have got together 'in the pub' or 'over lunchtime' to work through tasks and to support each other. This has resulted in a study day being delivered to cover areas of concern and to deliver assessment surgeries. These will not be accessible to all staff and therefore the sessions are being recorded for students and will be distributed on DVD or through YouTube, linked to the course materials in PebblePad.

An on-line student forum has been set up which relates direct to the course leader any issues. These are acted on immediately and included in the report to the pilot steering group.

Awards and quality issues

Each individual module is to be moderated across institutions to ensure parity in marking and feedback to students. Marks will be submitted to the LALIM subject board and students progression considered through SSPAL's progression and award boards. Module leaders for each module are invited to attend the subject board with course managers from all institutions attending the examination boards. An external examiner will oversee the collaboration in accordance with university of Wolverhampton's quality mechanisms.

Feedback from student is being monitored. Comments include:

"I think that Pebblepad is great and a very useful tool. It was quite daunting to start with but like anything else once you have used it for a while it all makes sense! I haven't used all parts of it yet as still early days but feel confident that I would be able to pick the rest up very easily. It is definitely a good tool for distance learning as it has all of the information required."

(FD TOM Student)

"I think the format and layout of the module 'makes it easy to find your way around it. I do still struggle to get my head round it for example I don't understand how to load a word document onto it. I have not had a lot of time to practice using it so I still find it quite daunting and perhaps I'm not using it as effectively as I could be. That is probably more a training need though as I'm not very confident with it"

(FD TOM Student)

Conclusions

Developments in innovation are not without difficulties and this case study might make some universities question the need to engage with such complexity. The traditional HEI must however recognise the need to move into the 21st century and its changing market place. Some of the change is forced upon it through funding mechanisms and government targets but more importantly it is essential for them to engage with and support employer led learning. Employer engagement produces challenges that will force HEI's to work together and thus overcome a number of, previously insurmountable, problems.

In order to face this reality innovation must be supported with resources both human, technical, subject specific and pedagogic. This runs through the entire process from planning to development, in its infancy and through modification, are included in validity teams and quality assurance mechanisms. Systems and attitudes need to sustain and not prolong the innovation whilst the whole might be more effective with a 'top down' approach.

At a fundamental level when working in partnerships with other HEI a consensus on financial arrangements (both costs and revenue), regulations, validation methodology (equal partnerships do exist) and strategies for partnership extension could be agreed in advance thereby providing a framework in which operational staff could make decisions. In short, that new practice in the area could be studied and enable partnership strategies of organisations to be dictated rather than emerge.

Staff teams should approach innovative validation in a more aspirational milieu. A team approach enables the project to move forward more effectively but also protects it from changes in composition. That aspiration could be fostered through the staff development approach of engagement. Learning from partnerships has been a very positive result of this expansion. Learning from differing cultures in both speech, style, management approach and expected outcome has added inordinately to all parties involved. Out of adversity has indeed grown a trusting and enduring partnership.

HEI need to be better prepared for industry partnerships. UKTEP has left itself vulnerable through its myopic view of its programme. It naively expected the total cohort retention to be protected in the same way as engaging with one student. Instead the HEI must recognise that working with organisation to develop materials and programmes for them must entail contractual obligations with the employer, rather than the student, as is now the case. This project should continue but might consider a third stream approach to delivery; this would provide a cost benefit to both employer and suppliers and negate the vulnerability of the HEI from withdrawal of employer support.

The pilot project team are cognisant that to meet "differentiated students needs they need to be flexible in course delivery and pedagogical approach, pay attention to the students voice and continue to involve employers" (Sheehan, 2007). This is a continuous journey for the Foundation Degree (Arts) Travel Operations Management that is supported by extensive research projects into personal tutoring, coaching and mentoring and recruitment, retention and progression.

UKTEP is now continuing to explore opportunities for extending into progression routes, variegated subject developments, and to extend the partnership of three HEI's into a wider grouping that would bring with it more regions, employers and much needed funding. To do so needs a more business-focused approach that sets clear aims and objectives with timescales that fit the needs of the employers. It should additionally be debated and agreed by those who can cut through the bureaucratically regulated processes of today's UK universities.

Some interesting contributions to the programmes future are already being developed. A JISC bid has been submitted which will incorporate JUROR and other file sharing facilities into the modules. Current plans include a possible trial with Understanding People. A step-by-step guide available as a Podcast will contribute to the clarity needed from course guides and support personal tutors who have dealt with a number of queries about the same questions.

Future tasks within modules will use PowerPoint & Excel features, such as comment boxes and slide shows to illustrate different scenarios. Ultimately alternative TSL will be considered and tested but the team accept that perhaps no VLE will offer a full range of functionality. Nevertheless if a number are linked effectively with other mediums such as online databases and journals and standard software then the team hope for a more fully functional programme. The aspect of pebbles functionality that the team would not want to lose is the Gateways which link to Pebble ensure traceable submission for distance learners

What has already been learnt is the need for consistency in Pebble content, clear structure is essential. Moreover students need to be able to access support, as the core student base are not necessarily tech-savvy. The personal contact which has been supplied via telephone, email and group might not be replaced but could prove to be more effective using technology with which they have more familiarity such as MSN Messenger or Podcasts.

The biggest challenge that has been faced is in creating innovative looking content, particularly images. Access to the wide range of file sharing sites now in academia and resources available through such sites as may continue to enable progress to be made nevertheless each module will need time to develop and reflect upon practice to ensure delivery method continues to be cutting edge and effective.

Within the innovative produce itself staff need to always consider the loneliness of sitting in front of a computer screen away from other students. Need proactive Pebble-savvy tutors and lecturers and to continually share new ideas and best practice in order to ensure continuing participation.

Finally in using a distance learning process dependant upon technology there are numerous other challenges. These include simple but previously unfamiliar tasks. These include connecting for Athens authentication, caps lock, remote servers not allowing access or needing proxy servers updating. Knowledge has allowed the current partnership to be able to interface effectively and quickly with work place IT departments about sites students need to be able access. Responses have not always been effective.

Recommendations for HEI Partnerships

- Ensure Vice Chancellor is behind the project or provide a clear link to universities strategic development plan
- Secure a modus operandi which includes aims, objectives and timescales
- Develop a project team which includes more than one person from each institution (or insist on very detailed minutes)
- Clearly articulate where changes can be implemented and what applications and time frames this may need (e.g. differing regulations or charges)
- Discuss the outcomes in relation to differing regulations (e.g. module size) and finance
- Complete a detailed cost benefit analysis.
- Develop resources for planning, development and ongoing collaborations clearly including finance, human and technical resources from a subject specific, pedagogic and technical point of view.
- Seek funding alternatives: some Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN's) fund specific subject sector qualification development
- Agree the validation method and partnership arrangements

- Consider progression arrangements clearly and ensure opportunities exist to develop these together
- Be flexible
- Draw on the expertise of others including quangos such as FdF
- Ensure continued buy in of employers through contractual arrangements rather than by individual learner enrolment
- Recognise the needs and expectations of employers that are realistically not restricted by the bureaucracy that is culturally part of a HEI.
- Recognise that employers are not interested in HEI processes but want a solution that is cost effective and deliverable.

Glossary

People 1st	the sector skills council for hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism
SPAL	School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure, University of Wolverhampton
UoW	University of Wolverhampton
CU	Coventry University
BCFS	Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies
FdF	Foundation Degree Forward

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