Responding to Imperatives in Contemporary Educational Service Delivery

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Abstract

Contemporary education demands flexible, dynamic services, supplied on demand. The University of the West Indies' MRP (Telecommunications) programme, which was designed to meet the needs of professionals in developing countries around the world, attempted to respond to these imperatives. This case study analysis will identify the key success factors of the MRP programme's design and implementation, and relate these to the shifting demands on contemporary universities. It will also discuss issues that arise in responding to radically changing capacity building needs, particularly with respect to operational and pedagogical matters.

This account of a tight-budgeted cross-regional distance education programme, contributes to the emerging database of Caribbean experience in the delivery of online education.

Keywords: telecommunications; The University of the West Indies; distance education; open learning

INTRODUCTION

This paper recognizes the emergence of a new era in university education: one which is driven by contemporary realities, particularly those faced by the vast population of working adults who are required to engage in continued professional development. The case of a particular Master's degree at the University of the West Indies is used to illustrate the special needs of the new era.

The MRP (Telecommunications) programme is The University of the West Indies (UWI)'s, Master's degree in Regulation and Policy, with a specialization in Telecommunications. Launched in December 2003 by the Faculty of Engineering, the MRP programme serviced three cohorts of students from over thirty developing countries, before transitioning to a university-wide programme at the end of 2008. It emerged as a prestigious programme which reaped high praise from its graduates and from major players in the telecommunications sector in the Caribbean and internationally. In addition to the key success factors, which are useful to inform the development of new programmes, the MRP also revealed insights about new imperatives for contemporary education.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The key success factors of the MRP (Telecommunications) programme case may be analysed according to Abel's categorization (Abel 2005):

• Compelling motivation
• Leadership: commitment and prioritization
• Programmatic approach

• Faculty support
• Student services
• Goals and measurements.

Compelling Motivation

The MRP (Telecommunications) degree was initiated in response to stakeholder demand for capacity building in the telecommunications sector at a time when the challenges of liberalization were looming.

Despite the availability of a regular stream of short-term training programmes on specific aspects of the telecommunications liberalization agenda, there was an unsatisfied need for inter-disciplinary expertise to interact between the economic, technical, policy, legal, social and other ingredients in the liberalization pot.   There was also an unsatisfied need for capacity building in cross-cutting competencies that relate to analytical and research skills and integrative strategies as well as to independent thought and professional networking within and external to the Caribbean. Such capacity building was most highly sought at the executive and senior management levels and most aptly delivered through a longer term academic, rather than shorter term training, programme.

The gap between the region's capacity building needs and its resources was compelling motivation for a response from The University of the West Indies. The most pressing of these needs resided in the public sector, which was responsible for driving the liberalization process to the benefit of all citizens. In contrast, its liberalization counterpart, the private telecommunications sector, enjoyed well-established, well-resourced professional development programmes. As the success of the liberalization process required that all stakeholders had access to high quality capacity building opportunities, the MRP (Telecommunications) programmed was highly motivated to address the needs of the public sector.

The provision of higher education to working professionals imposed special considerations for delivery. The distribution of these professionals within and outside of the Caribbean, presented compelling motivation to offer the programme through distance delivery.

Institutional Commitment and Prioritization

The weakest of the MRP programme's success factors related to institutional commitment and prioritization as expressed in tangible terms: finance and human resources. Notwithstanding, both at the external and at the institutional levels, the MRP was highly valued. A broad selection of Caribbean and international stakeholders from the public, private, educational and civil sectors fed inputs into the programme's design. Its advisory team comprised executive representation from the region's and world's key telecommunications organizations, including the Caribbean Telecommunications Union, the Caribbean Association of National Telecommunications Organizations and the International Telecommunications Union. Internally, the programme was buttressed by UWI's well established commitment to propelling the development of West Indies society and its growing commitment to extending reach through distance education.

Commitment at the programme level was crucial. A small close-knit team ran the programme under the leadership of a Programme Coordinator who instilled, and expected nothing less than, the demonstration of principles of quality assurance and the human touch in online community building. The MRP team prioritized values that related to academic excellence, academic integrity and to comprehensive support for teaching staff and learners.

Another key success factor was the combination of commitment and prioritization on the part of the programme team to develop policies, procedures and technological applications, as required, for online delivery and administration. These elements have been discussed in (Mallalieu and Collins, 2006) publications. Although UWI was not able to provide financial support, it offered swift institutional support for their implementation.

Programmatic approach

The programmatic approach, which was later identified by Abel (2005) as an online teaching success factor, applied in the case of the MRP programme and its associated postgraduate Diploma, DRP (Telecommunications). The MRP and DRP curricula did not evolve from existing courses. These were entirely new programmes, based on new priorities, and presented new opportunities from the start. Their development required a systematic approach: responsive, dynamic, and designed to fulfill articulated objectives over a relatively short time span.

Based on expressed needs, the curriculum was planned to incorporate emerging thematic elements from law, economics, engineering, planning and public policy as they relate to liberalization of the telecommunications sector. At the time, these requirements could not be met within the University of the West Indies. Servicing these needs required, therefore, a flexible and responsive approach to academic staffing. The MRP assembled a powerful team of experts from the Caribbean, Europe, USA and Africa, to bring a rich breadth of academic and industry experience to the programme. This novel staffing model was implemented alongside a comprehensive support framework led by the MRP's Distance Teaching Coordinator. It was mirrored by an equally comprehensive support framework for the MRP learning community, led by the MRP's Distance Learning Coordinator.

The programmatic approach to the design and delivery of the MRP offered a model for distance education programmes even when an elaborate institutional framework is lacking.

Support Services: Faculty, Student and Technical

Abel (2005) speaks of both faculty support and student services as being critical in online teaching. The MRP programme saw these two issues as inextricably linked. Staggered work hours over seven days each week; mirrored portfolios and comprehensive support frameworks, enabled rapid consideration and response throughout the semester, as discussed in (Mallalieu and Collins, 2009). Feedback from staff and students overwhelmingly ranked the MRP's support services as best of class.

An issue that may be more of a challenge for developing country programmes than was identified in the North American survey reported by Abel (2005) is that of vigilant and reliable technical support, which is also critical for both teaching staff and students. This aspect of the MRP programme, managed by its systems administrator, was the third leg on which the programme's support services balanced. It, too, was a key success factor of the MRP programme, particularly as policies, processes and a rich variety of Web-based applications were developed for the MRP to facilitate programme delivery (Mallalieu and Collins, 2009).

Goals and Measurements

Stakeholder accounts indicate that the MRP programme satisfied its articulated aims:

- To strengthen the capacity of national regulators and policy makers in the telecommunications industry through advanced level academic tuition with an emphasis on practical application to regional development.
- To serve as a regional and international academic focal point for the sharing of ideas and experiences in the area of telecommunications regulation and policy.

In the words of the Learning Initiatives for Reforms for Network Economies (LIRNE, 2008):

> "Despite its short life span, this small programme has had a considerable impact on the telecommunications sector. Admired for its academic rigour, and by all accounts

unmatched student support, the MRP (Telecommunications) programme went far beyond providing an excellent curriculum. The programme created a strong and dynamic international community of like-minded professionals and, through this online community, has become both a regional and international academic network for the sharing of ideas and experiences in the area of telecommunications regulation and policy."

Most MRP graduates have executive or senior management positions in the telecommunications sector and play leading roles in national regulation and policy directions. Many have attributed their professional successes directly to the MRP (Telecommunications) programme which has graduated 75 participants from over thirty developing countries around the world, 15 with distinction; and enjoyed an 87% retention rate over three cohorts

SATISFYING HUMAN CAPACITY NEEDS

The development and delivery of the MRP (Telecommunications) programme revealed various matters relating to the satisfying of regional human capacity needs. Chief among these are:

1. How can universities respond when the needs of their constituents change radically?
2. What pedagogical methodologies best suit the continuing education needs of such constituents?

Responding to Radically Changing Needs

When the needs of its constituents change radically, universities are faced with many issues which relate to the introduction of new programmes. A compelling case for the introduction of such programmes is a critical mass of adequately qualified applicants, with the wherewithal to pay fees; and the evident presence of sustained need. A dilemma occurs when the university is called upon to offer a new programme, consistent with its institutional mandate but when these three main criteria can not be met. The MRP (Telecommunications) presented such a scenario.

Notwithstanding the existence of a critical mass of adequately qualified applicants, the MRP was required for a specific time frame. A long-term market could only be sustained with periodic and extensive curriculum renewal. Focused on the public sector, which had expressed urgent capacity building needs but generally lacked the financial resources to cover fees, the MRP was not a commercial undertaking, but rather a commitment to regional development. The matter of financial support for programme development and delivery therefore became a priority issue, and remained so throughout the programme's life.

New university programmes are increasingly expected to be self-funded. The dilemma of need versus lack of resources, which the MRP programme experience highlights, threatens such demand-driven programmes, and presents challenges to their development. This is exacerbated by the combination of increasing financial constraints experienced by institutions worldwide; increasing expectations of university constituents for on-demand, high quality responsive programmes; and increasing competition among universities to satisfy these demands.

Some of the key success factors of the MRP programme point to strategic responses to these many challenges. The ability to swiftly assemble academic teams from a large pool rather than being constrained by static staffing, for example, is essential for providing on-demand, responsive programmes. However, the expectation for high quality programme development and delivery can only be met with comprehensive frameworks for student, staff and technical support, as was applied in the MRP case.

There exist strategies to meet the complex of financial challenges, some of which were employed by the MRP. These predominantly revolve around strategic alliances. In the case of the MRP the international telecommunications community was engaged in various aspects of programme development and delivery: stakeholders called for and led the design of its curriculum; the International Telecommunications Union facilitated the world wide dissemination of programme information and industry-sponsorship of scholarships to the entire first cohort; teaching and supervising staff as well as students were drawn from the global telecommunications sector and constituted a rich and diverse learning community.

The strategies employed by the MRP to meet its financial realities worked well until its single source of funding, the Cable and Wireless Virtual Academy, ceased operations worldwide, four years into its seven-year commitment. This illustrates the vulnerability of such programmes and the need for new models of stakeholder engagement.

Responding to Continuing Education Needs

To contemplate curriculum and delivery renewal past the first three MRP cohorts, a study on *Building Local Capacity for ICT Policy and Regulation: A Needs Assessment and Gap Analysis for the Caribbean* (Mc Namara 2008) was undertaken. Of the nineteen key ICT Policy and Regulatory needs reported in the study, the four least met in the Caribbean all related to pedagogical approaches to capacity building.

The study found that busy professionals who face perpetual competing demands, particularly at times of sectoral reform, can ill afford the luxury of traditional academic programmes. Their needs are best met by flexible curricula, dynamically configured around their particular work scenarios and priorities. For highest impact and commitment to time on task, it is best that these scenarios be used as the focal point for integrated treatment of the various aspects of the curriculum. The development of such a dynamic curriculum that delivers all the requisite learning outcomes is entirely possible. It can be effectively facilitated through impact-focussed strategic partnerships between the local, regional and international private and public sectors. Indeed, the new era of educational service delivery requires the inclusion of a new collaborative institutional eco-system.

DISCUSSION

Universities may need to reinvent themselves to respond to the new realities of the market in the context of their own mandates. At the same time, the enthusiasm to expand and diversify programmes must not, of itself, be used as a basis for introducing new programmes. Despite the urgent imperatives to become self-sustaining, universities may also bear the responsibility to offer programmes which are not necessarily profitable.

Whether or not universities are able to respond adequately to the new imperatives in contemporary educational service delivery depends to a great extent on effective stakeholder engagement and strategic alliances in the design and delivery of on-demand programmes. The experience of the MRP programme suggests that the needs of busy professionals will be best met by flexible curricula, dynamically configured and delivered just-in-time. This requires a high level of versatility which can be effectively facilitated through an institutional eco-system in which the private and public sector engage in immersive continuing education relationships to satisfy the needs of our professional learners.

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