

PAPER 3

COLLABORATION IN EXTERNAL STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA

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CONTENTS

Introduction	87
External Studies - Providers and Consumers	87
Initiatives in Collaboration	91
Bibliography	95

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

"A substantial case can be made for rationalisation of external studies on general grounds. At present there are simply too many providers and the potential economies of scale are not adequately realised".

Hugh Hudson, Chairman, Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC). 6.7.86
Conference on Productivity in Tertiary Education.

"In educational terms there are significant benefits where external students receive the same courses, the same teachers, the same assessment and the same awards as face-to-face students who also benefit from the thorough preparation of course materials necessary for external presentation".

CTEC Review of Efficiency & Effectiveness 1984
Chapter 7, 7.16

Taken together these two statements go a long way towards explaining the dilemma confronting those responsible for co-operation, collaboration and rationalisation in tertiary sector external studies in Australia. If we are to take advantage of new technologies for distance education delivery we must reduce, if not eradicate, duplication in course offering. But, if we are to offer students the same awards regardless of study modes, we must maintain integrated curricula serving both internal and external studies within the awarding institutions. The challenge, therefore, is to demonstrate that collaboration can serve the interests of "on-campus" teaching and learning as well as those of distance education. "No Mode is an Island", but recognition of this is all too often lacking.

External Studies - Providers and Consumers

An extract from the CTEC. Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education, Chapter 7.

- 7.1 An important feature of the Australian higher education system is the opportunity it offers for students to undertake courses at locations which suit their needs. External studies courses play a vital role in providing education for those students who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to attend courses on-campus. This chapter examines the benefits of external studies or distance education, the consequences of the rapid growth over the last decade and the potential for better co-ordination and rationalisation of external studies in higher education.

Background

7.2 In the decade since 1975 the number of students undertaking external studies courses has increased much more rapidly than total students (see Figure 7.1). In universities the number of students doubled to over 16,000 in 1985 and in CAEs (Colleges of Advanced Education) it trebled to almost 29,000, as shown in Figure 7.2. Students enrolled externally now number some 45,000, or 12 per cent of total higher education students and about 8 per cent of total studentload. There are also over 55,000 external students in the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) system. The number of institutions offering courses in the external studies mode has grown from six before 1970 to 40; seven of these are universities and the remainder are advanced education institutions.

FIGURE 7.1

RELATIVE GROWTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION
EXTERNAL AND TOTAL STUDENTS - 1975 TO 1985

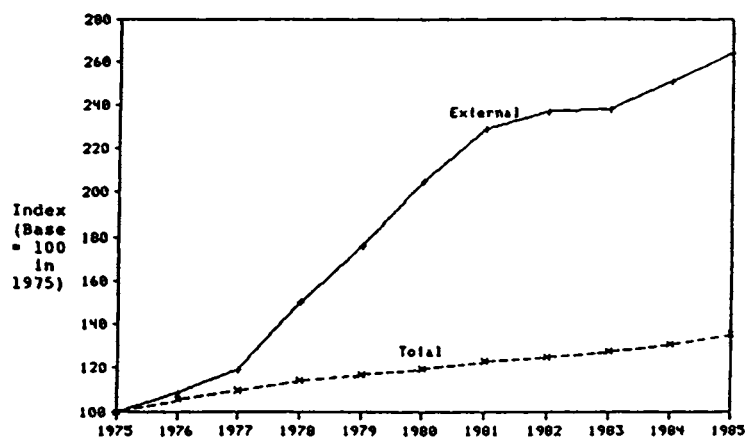
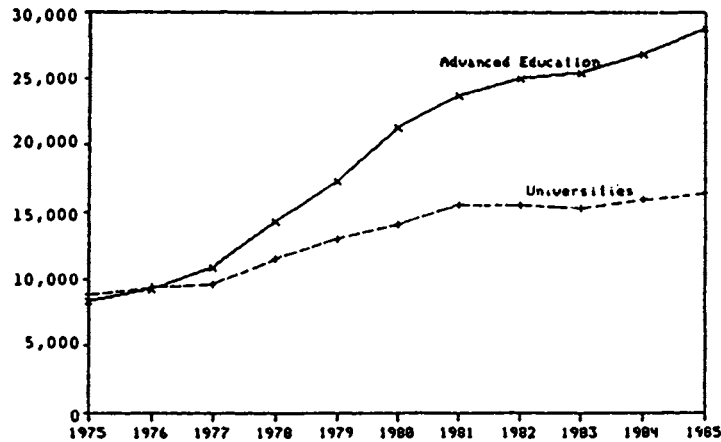


FIGURE 7.2

NUMBERS OF EXTERNAL STUDENTS
UNIVERSITIES AND CAES - 1975 TO 1985



External Students

7.3 External students are not typical of students in general. Table 7.1 shows that they tend to be older - more than 60 per cent of external students in higher education are 30 years of age or over, compared to less than 30 per cent for all students in higher education. From Table 7.2 it can be seen that only 16 per cent of students commencing advanced education courses by external study in 1985 did so on the basis of final school examination qualifications. For universities, the proportion was 10 per cent. Most external students have had some previous experience of post-secondary education.

TABLE 7.1

EXTERNAL HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS BY AGE - 1985

Years of Age	External		Number	Total Proportion per cent
	Number	Proportion per cent		
Less than 30	17,191	37.7	265,643	71.1
30 and over	28,405	62.3	104,677	28.3
TOTAL	45,596	100.0	370,320	100.0

TABLE 7.2

STUDENTS COMMENCING COURSES BY HIGHEST QUALIFICATION ON COMMENCEMENT - 1985

	External		Number	Total Proportion per cent
	Number	Proportion per cent		
ADVANCED EDUCATION (All Students)				
Previous higher education				
- completed	4,836	45.3	20,024	26.9
- incomplete	1,259	11.8	8,420	11.3
TAFE qualification	616	5.8	3,059	4.1
Final School Examination	1,668	15.6	30,756	41.3
College qualifying exam.	77	0.7	2,542	3.4
Other (including overseas)	2,218	20.8	9,613	12.9
TOTAL	10,674	100.0	74,414	100.0
UNIVERSITY (Undergraduate Bachelor Degree Students)				
Previous higher education				
- completed	1,341	35.2	4,674	10.9
- incomplete	545	14.3	4,864	11.3
Final School Examination	416	10.9	26,204	61.1
Other (including overseas)	1,508	39.6	7,145	16.7
TOTAL	3,810	100.0	42,887	100.0

7.4 External students are concentrated in only a few of the main fields of study provided in higher education. In advanced education the greatest numbers of external students are in the fields of education and commercial and business studies. In universities external students are most numerous in arts with significant numbers in education and economics/commerce.

Initiatives in Collaboration

Over the past five years a number of significant initiatives have been taken to foster collaboration in distance education by individual academics, programme committees and others, acting on behalf of providing institutions in the tertiary and the technical and further education sectors.

The following notes reflect my own perceptions of these developments.

1. Information Exchange

A National Directory of External Courses in Australia covering Universities, Colleges of Advanced Education and TAFE has been published in 1985 (for 1986) and 1986 (for 1987) by the School of External Studies and Continuing Education, University of Queensland with the financial assistance of CTEC and ASPESA (Australia & South Pacific External Studies Association).

During 1986, the Education Unit of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) commenced development of a National Directory of Tertiary Education Courses on Viatel under the name of "Coursefinder". Phase I covers courses offered in the external mode with plans now in hand to extend the Directory to include on-campus courses.

As part of a national TAFE External Studies Network Scheme, agreement has been reached to publish all new course material in either hard copy or digital form and to make the digital stored material available either on floppy discs, or by direct transmission through Telecom Services to compatible terminals anywhere in Australia. In addition, consortium and bureau arrangements for the development, production and tutoring of selected courses by inter-state co-operation are in hand.

It is significant to note that TAFE equates more closely to a "single mode" distance education structure than to the "two-mode integrated" systems, which are characteristic of Australian external studies.

2. Materials Exchange

Mention has been made in the previous section of the TAFE National Network for exchange of materials in digital form.

Progress in materials exchange between Universities and CAEs involved in external studies has been very limited. Moran (1986) has commented on the situation in a report written following a study tour to Canada and the U.S.A. in 1985. Her starting point is the familiar rhetorical question "Why re-invent the wheel when there are excellent ones available elsewhere?". She notes that this rationale for collaboration in the development and production of courses is well known and the concept much applauded. However, in her view, there are two reasons why Australia has been slow in responding; academic and institutional attitudes and logistic problems in communication and timing. Whilst these are no doubt valid, I would add a third which is of equal, if not greater importance. In the integrated two-mode

system, an academic or group of academics buying-in course materials from another institution must be satisfied that this will meet the defined objectives of a single curriculum serving both their off-campus and on-campus students. The imported course unit or modules must be adopted as component parts of an award endorsed by the institution for all its graduates, not just those who are out of sight. Because academics are generally trained to be adaptive, perhaps even spontaneous, teachers in their face-to-face classes, this constraint is a real one. Those advocating materials exchange in the Australian system need to address it as an educational and staff development issue, rather than some personality flaw in the academic or as institutional myopia.

For some years Massey University in New Zealand and RMIT in Australia have been providing courses to serve the curriculum of the Open College of East Asia - a single mode institution.

3. Co-operation in Training and Personnel Exchanges

At the sub-regional level, Deakin University, Murdoch University and University Sains Malaysia (USM) have operated a collaborative scheme since 1983 under the sponsorship of the International Development Programme of Australian Universities and Colleges. The objective has been to share experience in course writing so as to assist a major rewrite of external mode courses at USM. At Deakin, USM academic staff received a structured course on distance education writing techniques, whereas at Murdoch the emphasis was on 'pairing' of USM and Murdoch scientists with shared disciplinary and course preparation interests. This scheme was concluded in 1986.

4. Joint Course Production

The reasons why this form of co-operation is not more extensively developed are probably the same as those outlined in a previous section on materials exchange. Gillard et al (1984) have described the scheme for "co-development" of courses which were to be constituent parts of the M.Ed. Programmes at Deakin and Queensland University. Three courses were planned, but only one eventuated, and the authors cite institutional self-interest concerning funding as the major impediment.

They point out that it is quite common for academics in different institutions to collaborate on research projects and that in many cases the success of research programmes depends upon this pooling of expertise and resources. For this co-operation to be reflected in co-operative course writing, the co-developed courses need to be offered by both institutions in parallel. "In this way, the academics involved achieve explicit recognition for their contributions to course development (acknowledgement of authorship, etc.) and for their contributions to teaching (students taking their course in their own institutions)" (Gillard et al p.79). It may be worth adding the now familiar proviso that, in the co-developed course, content would need to be available to students taking the course in their own institution in either the internal or external mode.

5. Joint Programme Development

The most significant and now widely known example of this approach to co-operation is the inter-University Womens Studies Programme established by Murdoch, Deakin and Queensland Universities in 1983. Its development has now been documented (Maclean 1985, Thornton 1986) and its viability demonstrated by 4 years of operation. Essentially, students draw on a pool of courses contributed by the three universities in order to complete a Major awarded by any one of them. The principle behind the scheme is therefore that of inter-institutional enrolment, backed by rationalisation of course offerings rather than by joint course writing or exchange of materials. A similar model may be emerging to provide for the external teaching of Nursing.

6. Inter-Institutional Enrolment

The "Toowoomba Accord" established in 1984 between the five university major providers of external studies has so far sought to further extend the principle of inter-institutional enrolment. Each participant university advertises to its own students a range of elective courses which can be taken externally from one or more of the others. Experience in the first two years suggests that the idea of broadening their choices by drawing on an enhanced range of general electives may be less attractive to students than the opportunity for them to lock in to specific courses tangential to their Majors.

7. Brokering

Whilst external studies is planned to operate largely independently of distance, vacation school requirements and other similar constraints have tended to produce State catchment areas. In Tasmania and the Northern Territory, which have no University external studies provision of their own, this has led to the development of educational brokering agencies operated by the North-West Council for Community Education and the Darwin Institute of Technology respectively. Through these agencies prospective external students in both the University and CAE sectors have been given advice and guidance in meeting requirements of distant institutions. Support has also been offered for locally resident students once they are enrolled.

8. Contracting

Walsh (1986) has produced an evaluation of contracting in Western Australia. Contracting is a system of collaboration which he sees as designed specifically to foster intersectoral collaboration. "In the context of Western Australia, contracting or country contracting as it is commonly known ...(is)... an agreement made between a tertiary institution and a regional College whereby the latter is licensed by the tertiary institution to teach certain of its award courses. The College provides staff and resources and the institution supplies the funds required". (Walsh p6-7). By the end of 1986, the first year of a number of CAE awards were being taught at six Country Colleges in

Western Australia. These awards ranged from the Bachelor of Business (WAIT - Western Australian Institute of Technology) and Graduate Diploma in Computer Studies (WACAE - Western Australian College of Advanced Education) to the Associateship in Agriculture (WAIT).

9. Offshore Distance Education

1984 saw the publication of two Reports which had considerable significance for the provision of courses overseas to non-Australian nationals. These were the Committee to review the Australian Overseas Aid Program (the Jackson Committee) and the Committee of Review of Private Overseas Student Policy (the Goldring Committee). Goldring, in particular, recognised the potential for external studies by commenting "that the opportunities for giving distance education an overseas focus would provide added advantages of economies of scale for the provision for such technology for Australians, as well as other direct benefits as a result of the extension of opportunities overseas". Several Australian tertiary institutions have taken initiatives. These include Darling Downs IAE (Institute of Adult Education), which has long had a particularly strong and effective entrepreneurial approach to distance education, the W.A. Institute of Technology, which has operated some "Outreach" teaching of award courses in Singapore and Warrnambool IAE and the Murdoch University, which entered into agreement with the Malaysian agency Disted Services Sdn. Bhd. for the enrolment and teaching support of full fee-paying students taking external courses in Business Study and Maths/Computing respectively.

10. Efficiency and Effectiveness in External Study

The CTEC Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness, led by Mr Hugh Hudson, has made some very specific and unequivocal proposals for rationalisation of the number, status and roles of institutional providers of external studies. These proposals would strengthen the roles of regional institutions (Darling Downs, University of New England, Deakin University) as against metropolitan providers (Queensland, Macquarie) where this option exists and co-ordinate the activities of other providers where it does not. Significantly, CTEC vests in itself the responsibility for ensuring that rationalisation of institutional structures and off-course offerings does, in fact, occur. Emphasis in this review has been placed heavily on the preparation of course materials and it is regarded as axiomatic that "for the current traditional methods of teaching the minimum institutional enrolment necessary to support efficient operation of an external studies program would be at least 2000" (7.27) and "at least 150 enrolments per unit are desirable for an acceptable level of efficiency" (7.26). There is, however, little comment on the conditions necessary to ensure an acceptable level of teaching or tutoring effectiveness. Perhaps then we are led back to the dilemma posed at the outset, one which seems to lead inexorably towards increasing centralisation of course provision and an ever widening gulf between academic course writer and student consumer. When this happens, the challenge facing us will be to ensure that efficient delivery is not attained at the expense of effective learning.

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