Tilling the Soil of the European Higher Education Area, stage one

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Abstract:

The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy present both opportunities and challenges for teachers in the European Area. As tensions surface between different forms of national legislation, accreditation and quality assurance, projects need to be developed which model ways of resolving problems within a European context. Utilising their links and network of contacts across a natural community within the European Union, five partner institutions set out to develop a Masters degree for teacher practitioners. This paper reports on the progress and pitfalls experienced as the project unfolds. Collaboration between Universities and High Schools across national boundaries carries risks. The ideal of multi-lingual diversity is compromised by the spectre of losing control of quality assurance processes. Concerns over translation, double-marking and role of external examiners across language borders threaten institutional security and send budgets spiralling. Cultural differences between European and CATS credit systems outweigh issues of mere calibration. Qualification equivalency, the diversity and multi-tiered character of national funding models all serve to discourage initiative. Fear of unfavourable reports by quality assurance agencies engenders institutional timidity whilst ministers and government departments talk the rhetoric of convergence and competition in the global market place. Despite the risks, there are successes. As the project moves forward, German-speaking teacher-practitioners begin to study and write in their mother tongue on an English Masters programme. Approved tutors, trained in England, teach and mark in German, sharing supervision with English university staff. A bilingual Examiner works with the moderating team and award pathways are approved. Models of flexible, distributed learning developed for dispersed communities in South West England are found to be equally suitable for working teachers in Dusseldorf, Stockholm; Zeist and Budapest. The concept of school improvement married with practitioner research gains strength as the idea of a school-based Masters takes root. In the context of Bologna and Lisbon, the ideals of lifelong learning, staff-student mobility, mutual recognition and accreditation appear realisable, given active partnership, collaboration and the exercise of trust married to professionalism.

In an increasingly global world, collaboration carries risks. The ebb and flow of political and economic life reflects this on a daily basis as does the uncertain cultural activity of education. This paper reports on a journey undertaken by a group of teacher trainers working together across national boundaries to develop a European Masters programme suitable for Steiner Waldorf educators.
Tensions implicit in the paradox of globalisation (Hargreaves 1994) engender conflicting responses regarding education. Political rhetoric tasks schools with winning competitive advantage for the nation in the rising global contest for mastery within the knowledge economy (Kelly 1995); the culture of audit and quality assurance generating institutional uncertainty affirms the continuing local power of the ancient adage, ‘Good walls make good neighbours!’ (Hewett 1999).

The project around which this paper is focused has its roots in the Bologna Declaration (European Commission (a) 2005) and the Lisbon Process (Education Europe 2005). The narrative it presents mirrors some of the considerable challenges faced by European educators since the Declaration was signed in 1999. Its primary perspective will be from the standpoint of UK academics based in an English university but it looks out from the shores of England towards a network of colleagues working in other European institutions.

The educational system proposed by Bologna constitutes two main levels, namely: undergraduate (Bachelor’s degree) and graduate (Master’s and doctoral degrees). By establishing a system of transferable credits for completed levels, and by removing current obstacles to the universal recognition of degrees, politicians and analysts argue that mobility, cooperation and quality assurance can be promoted throughout the European area (Bekhradnia 2004). Without these qualities, Europe stands to fall behind its competitors in the rapidly expanding global market for higher education, a market increasingly dominated by America, Australia and South-East Asia.

The Declaration, universally agreed by 29 ministers, made a commitment towards establishing a European area of higher education by 2010. The detailed realisation of its aim, that of bringing about progressive convergence of the overall framework of higher education in Europe to easily readable and comparable degrees, remains complex and problematic as individual states and institutions struggle to overcome conservatism and resistance to change within their own national systems and ways of working. (Higher Education Policy Institute 2005)

The European Masters Project is a three year European Cooperation Project, funded by the European Commission under the Comenius scheme (European Commission (a))
2005). It began its work in November 2002 and involves Steiner Waldorf teacher seminars in Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Hungary (European Commission (b) 2005) together with the University of Plymouth (which acts as the lead institution). Its aim has been to design and validate a CPD Masters programme acceptable to the education systems of all participating member countries across language and cultural boundaries in the context of the Steiner Waldorf integrated and holistic education method (Clouder, C. & Rawson, M. 1999). This paper, reporting back from the field of action, asks in a general way a fundamental question: How can effective convergent models of higher education be realised in the European context? In reporting, specifically, about the achievements and set-backs of the project it hopes to contribute to understanding and knowledge regarding globalisation in a European context.

Visions of convergent, collaborative schemes developing across the European area are inspiring but, in the face of the radical reform they necessitate, they are as likely to generate uncertainty and wariness regarding new schemes as success (Hargreaves 1994). Implicit in the Europe-wide drive to establish the Bologna/Lisbon process is the idea of Europe holding its own in the global marketplace for higher education. The principle of global competitiveness is readily espoused by politicians. In the UK, for example, Charles Clarke, former Education Secretary, persuading English academics that ‘Bologna matters!’ argues that:

“The Bologna process is not about taking someone else's agenda... it's about engaging in process and making our points... We've too often looked at Bologna and found it threatening. We need to engage.”

Charles Clarke: Universities UK Conference June 2004

The contrast between institutional and bureaucratic response and the voice of the political executive is striking. As soon as the practical realisation of a project begins to take place, attempts to effect seamless integration between different national systems become easily stalled. Credit transfer between The UK’s Credit Accumulation Transfer Scheme (CATS) and the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) is not straightforward (Bekhradnia 2004)

In the UK system student achievement is generally measured in terms of the realisation of learning outcomes; the European system awards credits on completion
of units of study, related to hours of study (European University Association 2002). There is no conversion formula which can adequately translate one set of credits into the other. The differences are cultural and are not simply a matter of calibration.

Issues of compatibility are not simply bound up with calibrated equivalence between culturally different credit systems: perception of the status of awards is also involved. In the UK, a Masters degree is viewed primarily as a research qualification; in German-speaking countries a Masters qualification with a subject specialism is a required qualification for teachers working at secondary level. In the Netherlands, complex national regulations need to be fulfilled before a programme can be recognised as effective.

As the project comes into its final phase in 2005, what has been an idea and ideal begins to be tested as a reality. The acid test for the European Masters as conceived by the partners has to be in the form of programmes developing in countries outside that of the lead UK institution. A UK pilot, started early in the life of the project, (Steiner-Teacher 2005 [a]) has enabled the UK partners to field-test existing systems designed for the University’s Integrated Masters Programme (University of Plymouth 2005) but, no matter how successful, such a pilot could not be seen as fully realising the project’s international aims. It is in the Netherlands that the first European programme arising from the project is being developed and partners look with interest at the process through which this new initiative, scheduled to begin between January and June 2006, comes to birth. The Integrated Masters Programme, with its flexible, teacher-centred and outcome-based approach is clearly attractive to communities of educators far beyond the UK. There is an obvious need for teaching and learning pathways which offer professional development and motivate practical research within the classroom.

The Dutch initiative provides the current focus through which the project, fundamentally concerned with design and validation, becomes an actual taught programme leading to recognised qualifications and awards. There are questions which need to be answered if this is to be fully realised:

- Will an MA (Ed) awarded by a UK University (University of Plymouth) be recognised by Dutch authorities as a professional qualification?
Can the UK University be confident that an institution, teaching one of its MAs in a European language (Dutch) in a collaborative partnership, can adequately deliver such a programme of study? Would such a collaborative arrangement be acceptable to UK and Dutch quality assurance agencies?
• Can Dutch-speaking ‘university-approved tutors’ (IMP Education 2005) be trained by the awarding institution (University of Plymouth) so they can fully maintain academic standards and comply with quality assurance regulations?
• How effective can quality assurance systems be regarding the appointment of bilingual external examiners, double-marking across English and Dutch scripts, programme monitoring and approval by assessment panels and boards?

The above questions present a formidable challenge for would-be pioneers and it is predictable that cautionary voices are likely to sound at both institutional and national levels when initiatives such as the European Masters are proposed. The idea of a university devolving powers and name to an institution in another country which might have quite different traditions and priorities in terms of the way in which it conducts its higher education is a daunting one and it is understandable that managers might feel concern that a situation might come about where lines of management become blurred and quality assurance hard to manage.

The decision by the project members to integrate their European Masters programme within the University of Plymouth’s Integrated Masters Programme has necessitated the development of collaborative partnerships between the University and other participating institutions. These partnerships require a satisfactory formal ‘approval’ visit in which management structure, staffing, resources and financial systems are viewed and assessed as being sufficient and appropriate for effective collaboration. Central to a satisfactory outcome for any approval process must be a resolution of the issue of the language of tuition. Initially, the University approval process was designed for local collaborative partnerships, largely in the West of England, but the advent of the European Masters project has raised new questions, namely, how can the home institution be sure about the quality of work produced by students studying and writing in a mother tongue which is not English in a country hundreds of miles away from the main campus? Translation of student assignments is an important tool
in assuring consistency of standards but this presents a pathway fraught with challenges as costs are likely to be prohibitive unless an agreement is reached that only a representative sample is required. Work on translation within the European Masters project has raised the interesting question: How does a translator deal with a piece of work where the writer’s language fails to express ideas clearly or is of a poor standard? Unless the translator is highly skilled, there is a temptation for the text to be ‘revised upwards’ to a more standard English if the home language piece is written in a weak or incoherent style. Assessment of the student’s work is fundamentally in terms of its ‘masters-worthiness’ so issues of parity and fairness need to be carefully addressed together with questions of equivalence.

In an international collaborative partnership where more than one language is used for assessment, the role and function of the External Examiner is crucial. Such a person needs to be not only fluent in both languages being used but, ideally, familiar with the academic traditions and conventions of the different national institutions. Above all, there is a factor of professional trust which all partners need to exercise regarding assessment when multi-lingual scripts are in use. This process has been recognised and formalised by the QAA in their precepts regarding collaborative partnerships (Quality Assurance Agency 2004). Currently, results from the first stage assessment process of a Swiss pilot are encouraging; close scrutiny of translated samples married to deep level critical evaluation conducted between the Board and Examiner enable an informed approach to be taken to double-marking. Expertise gained from this exercise is transferable with similar arrangements being set up for the Dutch initiative. Models of effective practice are emerging which are applicable to future partnership initiatives. This is encouraging but the process brings with it the problem of spiralling costs. Quality assurance on an international scale incurs travel costs as well as accommodation and the need to translate not only documentation but also electronic teaching and learning resources. For some partners, particularly those in countries where students’ tuition costs are subsidised, the costs of such a programme is likely to create significant problems with recruitment. A major challenge for the European Masters Programme, as it emerges from the cocoon of EU subsidy onto the full European stage will be the issue of funding. Programmes taught in various participating countries will, inevitably have to find creative solutions to meeting the
8costs of ensuring quality assurance and maintaining effective lines of management between a diverse network of partners.

Despite the risks and set-backs experienced by the partners, there are noteworthy successes. As the project moves forward, German-speaking practitioner-students enrolled on the Swiss pilot begin to study and write in their mother tongue on an English Masters programme. Approved Swiss tutors, trained in England, but teaching in Switzerland, teach and mark in the German language, sharing supervision with English university staff under the eye of a bilingual Examiner who works with the moderating team advising and evaluating the programme for the University (Steiner - Teacher [b]). Assignments, written in German and moderated between two languages, are approved by an English assessment board. Dutch-speaking tutors, also trained by English staff, are preparing to launch their approved Masters programme in Steiner Waldorf Curative Pedagogy (digitalsymbiosis 2005) This will be taught in Dutch with assignments also written and approved between two languages. Preliminary discussions with Swedish partners are preparing the way for further programmes being developed in Sweden.

The concept of school-improvement married to practitioner-research in a flexible, school-based programme built around the needs of teachers is beginning to take root in the UK and Europe. Requests are coming in from as far afield as South Africa and the United States, indicating a real need for international post-graduate programmes able to offer flexible, distributed learning in a CPD context. It is the hope of the project members that their continuing efforts over the past three years may have helped prepare a worthwhile seed bed which other international educators may share and, in the course of time produce a good harvest.

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