An Internationalisation Project:

Hopes and Disappointments

History at The Higher Education Academy

An Internationalisation Project: Hopes and Disappointments

During 2009-10, I investigated the possibility of developing a small-scale internationalisation project with a colleague at an American university. We had discovered that we teach a very similar module on Nineteenth-Century British Women's History, and were keen to explore the possibility of working together in ways that were mutually enriching for both ourselves and our students. In the first instance, this would involve students collaborating in some small way. We hoped that the collaboration might grow, to include student and, possibly, staff exchanges.

Although this project has ultimately not been successful, it is hoped that this report might still be helpful, in terms of outlining a range of possibilities for international collaboration as well as some of the processes involved, for colleagues who are operating in a more conducive environment.

The first section of this report focuses on 'internationalisation' at our respective universities. The second is an outline of the process involved in setting up an international collaboration, using our small-scale project as a case study.

1. Internationalisation

Britain

Internationalisation has a high profile my university. It is stressed in various university-wide policy documents and in the international strategies and plans for the faculty in which my department resides. These developments sit within an external national framework concerning the Internationalisation of HE, which includes: the Prime Minister's Initiative 2 (2006), the Higher Education Academy, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the Bologna Process, the long-established Erasmus Programme, and more.

Internationalisation already occurs in many contexts, including:

- culturally mixed student cohorts on many programmes
- the option on some programmes for Work Based Learning opportunities abroad
- other student mobility opportunities, including via Erasmus and Socrates, with partner universities
- the opportunity to study a foreign language
- an 'internationalised curriculum'
- Distance Learning courses which are available to students outside the UK
- a positive attitude towards international students and necessary accreditation to international student bodies
- opportunities for international sabbaticals and transnational teaching for teaching staff

In History, our experience is less extensive. As with most History departments, our curriculum is 'internationalised', with modules on Soviet, Eastern European, German, Australian, Indian and (British and Western) Imperial History. However, despite our current Erasmus-Socrates contracts, we have few international students and very few of our students take up opportunities presented by Erasmus and Socrates.

Indeed, we are aware of a range of significant challenges to internationalisation, including:

- reliance of individual staff members and the amount of time involved in setting up the process;
- the difficulties presented by the modular structure and by 'learner mobility' issues;
- Quality assurance procedures that restrict student options, i.e. being unable to substitute a mandatory second year module whilst studying abroad, and therefore being unable to receive a History degree at the end of their three years.

The United States

At my colleague's university in the United States, internationalisation is successfully established. I will focus here on their partnership with another UK university, which includes a study abroad programme in which about 20 students travel to the UK every academic year. The students are taking a liberal arts degree (rather than a focused degree). In Britain, they take three modules, which total 16 US-credits in one semester (i.e. a full load):

- a module in the student's major (6 US credits; 20 British credits);
- an internship in the local city (for which they receive (6) academic credits);
- a module with their home university Director (4 US credits). The Director is a faculty member who resides in the UK for the duration of their study abroad. This allows the programme to avoid many of the quality-control problems associated with study abroad programs. The Director is supported by a program assistant who is a British native and a local graduate student. The program assistant serves as the programme liaison to the British university and helps students to identify and pursue internships. It also helps students with various local issues.

Students live at the British university, either staying with a host family or on campus. Fees are paid to the British university for tuition, accommodation, and 100-meal plan. Students are responsible for other meals, book purchases, personal expenses, and independent travel. They take part in 2-3 excursions of about three days' length within the UK (e.g., to London) and several smaller ones (e.g. Castle Howard). The programme does not make a profit, but it breaks even and provides students - many of whom probably would not go abroad on any other programme - with a valuable experience.

2. Our project

(a) The initial collaboration

The first step was to establish the kind of link we wanted to set up between our modules, which focus on Nineteenth-Century British Women's History, with a prominent place given to the use of primary documents. In the first instance, we decided to tweak our modules so that we would teach the same range of topics. This involved compromise on both sides and we came up with four topics: ideas about gender and femininity, women and the anti-slavery movement, marriage reform and the suffrage movement. We decided to follow my pattern of delivery, whereby each topic is taught over two-weeks, and includes two lectures, a seminar focusing on reading the primary sources, a seminar focusing on close reading of the secondary sources, and a student presentation. We decided also to follow my US colleague's pattern of assessment, whereby various assessment tasks are set throughout the semester rather than, rather unsatisfactorily, at the end of the module.

Our next step was to identify the nature of the student collaboration. We decided that, in the first instance, this should be small. There were various possibilities:

- to encourage our students to collaborate, but not require that they do so.
- to require that our students collaborate, but not assess their collaboration.

- to require that our students collaborate, but simply assess (on a Pass/Fail basis) whether they have done so, and not the quality or content.
- to require that our students collaborate, and assess the quality of their collaboration, as some part of their final grade.

After much exploration, we decided on a form of peer assessment, focusing on the student presentation, which was to follow option 3 above. The plan was as follows: Students were to send a list of their presentation points to a group of students at the partner university BEFORE they presented. The receiving students contribute 2-3 points of substantive constructive criticism. The presenters use these to improve the presentation BEFORE they make it. Tutors on both sides see all the correspondence. The presenters then send a summary of their presentation points to the other group of students AFTER they present, and get feedback.

We also considered, but decided against in the first instance, having a reflective piece from each student or group of students on what they've learned about the other group -- i.e. how higher education seems to proceed differently in each country, or strengths and weaknesses of each group. This would involve significant differences, as the UK group would be studying their national history and reading only one subject full time at university.

We began the process of modifying our module guides accordingly.

(b) Exchanges: using the Erasmus-Socrates framework

The next step was to explore the possibility for student and staff exchanges. Our exchange programme at SHU is dependent upon Erasmus-Socrates. The procedure for setting this up **within Europe** is quite straightforward, as there is a framework for forming an international exchange agreement under Erasmus-Socrates. I investigated this in some detail, as I assumed it would be useful knowledge when setting up a North American link. The process is as follows:

- The tutor arranges for an 'initial visit' Erasmus-Socrates travel grant, usually available via the university's International Office, to visit the partner institution and named academic contact/contacts. The tutor should be aware that if the Faculty/Department is involved, this process can carry certain risks/opportunities, such as having to represent more than one subject during your visit, and/or having an enforced travel companion! These risks might be minimised if the exchange proposed is specific to one degree programme.
- Whilst visiting: basic details should be agreed with the academic contact, i.e. how many students and staff might be involved in the exchange. Typically this might be two students for one semester each year, and one member of staff for one week, both ways. Under Erasmus-Socrates, the credit exchange is already sorted out. Our students need 60 British credits, i.e. 30 ECTS (European credits) per semester.
- Also whilst visiting: establish details concerning how students are taught, how they are assessed, the availability of English-language books in the library, etc. A short, standard form should be completed, which has to be signed off on return.
- The tutor should also visit the International Office at the partner university, and gather information about the application process for students, about finding accommodation, and ensuring that semester start dates don't clash with exams). It is useful to establish a rapport with someone in the international office who you can email at a later stage with questions on behalf of students.

While this is very straightforward for exchanges within Europe, there is no equivalent framework for international links with **North American** universities. Although my university has a contract with another American university, which includes History students, it appears that generally, decisions are made bilaterally. Although some universities might notionally trade in ECTs as a common currency, you have to work out how grades correspond in each instance. There are also no mobility grants, so funding has to be found elsewhere.

Our arrangement, then, was going to be more time-consuming to set up than we had originally envisaged. It was do-able, however, but as we were unsure as to how long we were individually going to teach this particular module, we decided to put the exchange aspect of the proposal on hold for now, and to concentrate on the small-scale collaboration.

Then came the unexpected challenges.

(c) Our first hurdle concerned student numbers.

We hadn't pre-empted this, and I certainly should have done. 60 students were signed up for the module at my university whereas 8-16 had registered for my colleague’s module. The problems presented by this were not insurmountable: the UK students could comment once each per semester on the US students' presentations, for example, whereas the US students could go through the process two or three times. However, the issue that loomed came from Quality: that even if they worked in groups (of a larger number of British students and smaller number of American students), a parity of experience could not be guaranteed.

(d) A further - new - issue emerged concerning Pass/Fail assessment tasks.

This year at my university, these have been at best discouraged, with many module descriptors rewritten to exclude them.

(e) Finally, concerns were raised about not having a general agreement with the American university.

The relationship between two academics was not sufficient. Overcoming this problem would involve returning to step (b) above, to secure funding and arrange visits between the two institutions, i.e. to embark on a huge procedure which was at this stage beyond what I felt able to make a commitment to. In the end, the hoops to jump through were too numerous to proceed.

I believe that my conclusion - that Quality Assurance processes are often in conflict with a mission statement to promote internationalisation - is by no means confined to my own institution. The investigation into the possibilities and processes for collaboration has been illuminating, nonetheless, and I hope it can be of use to colleagues.

July 2010