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Abstract

The Human Dimension: working together on distance learning projects

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Distance learning holds the promise of delivering education and training to lifelong learners and thus building human resource capacity within a global information society, a core objective for APRU in assisting members become more effective contributors within the Pacific Rim community. The communication and information technologies supported by the worldwide web provide an important part of the infrastructure for distance learning environments. However, in establishing joint projects, partnerships or alliances between APRU members, human resources and institutional culture components of the infrastructure will play a deciding role.

Resistance to technology-led innovation in higher education often takes extreme positions expressed in statements such as “the greatest hazard posed by e-learning . . . (is) the dangerous belief that learning can take place without teachers” (Martin and Webb, 2002). Perhaps an even greater hazard is to dismiss the opportunity for pedagogical reform by focussing on a shallow interpretation of distance learning. Understanding the apparent resistance to instructional technology adoption and change in research intensive universities has highlighted both institutional issues such as leadership and empowerment, and individual issues such as professional development and time release (Szabo and Sobon, 2003; Epper and Bates, 2001). Academic staff in research-intensive universities face tremendous demands on their time as they seek to balance their research agenda with increasing pressure to create ICT-enhanced classrooms.

The key agents of change in higher education, students and academic staff, are working in new economies. Students, particularly post-graduate students, seek an international curriculum and distance learning opportunities are increasingly competitive with local provision. Academic staff, used to operating in global discipline based research networks, now find that teaching can also be a global, discipline based enterprise. Developments in sharing and reusing learning objects, are creating this new “economy” in Higher Education (The COHERE Group, 2002) where discipline based joint projects and teaching collaborations within and between institutions are creating exciting opportunities for pedagogical innovation.

Trans national differences in learning approaches, and in the cultural contexts in which learning takes place, generate critical design and management issues for joint projects between APRU members. The expertise and services required to support project development requires equal, if not more, attention be paid to the human dimension as that addressed to the technology dimension.

In reflecting on these developments this presentation will draw on experiences at the University of Sydney in developing innovative post-graduate programs for global distribution including collaborative work with the University of British Columbia in exploring joint distance learning programs.