

Full-time international master's programme online: experiences, challenges and changes

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Abstract

Online and distance education is often associated with high dropout rates and low learning retention. In this paper we present and analyze experiences and challenges for a two-year, full-time, online M.Sc. programme in Development Management (DM) offered by the University of Agder (UIA), Norway, in collaboration with one Asian and four African universities. The students work primarily online, but also participate in two compulsory face-to-face sessions. Important elements in the study programme are a specially developed e-learning pedagogy including a socio-constructivist emphasis, a Learning and Management System (LMS) called Fronter, structured and detailed study guides following the ECTS guidelines, an intensive student support system with trained tutors, a collaborative learning environment, quality assured study sites, economic incentives, face-to-face sessions and implementation of student responsibility. This study programme is intensive and demanding, and students are expected to work on average 40 hours per week. The DM programme has been characterised by a low drop-out rate (less than 10%). The study programme was reviewed after completion of the first cohort of students and the lessons learned were followed in making improvements implemented for the second and third cohorts.

Keywords

Full-time international online studies, socio-constructivist pedagogy, LMS, study guide, online tutors, ECTS, student support system, challenges in e-learning, international educational networks

Introduction

What is the ideal way to deliver a full-time master's degree programme online? How can one cope with unexpected challenges? How can one learn from participant evaluations, experience and reviews to improve the programme?

Research has shown that several factors need to be present in order to succeed in e-learning (see e.g. Stephenson, 2002). Good online education requires carefully designed courses (Biggs, 2003), well-trained tutors and continuous interaction and feedback. The technology is obviously a barrier to many, especially in countries with low bandwidth and unreliable electricity grids. A good learning management system (LMS) is of high importance, and the participants must become familiar in the use of the often alienating learning environment in an online 'classroom' when using the LMS. However, this skill quickly becomes natural – students work in the LMS without thinking much about it after a week or two. The next barriers are to motivate students and tutors to stay on - full time - for two years, and to ensure high learning retention. These issues are pedagogical, and can be quite challenging. Online and distance education is often associated with high dropout rates and low learning retention. The DM study programme experience is that collaborative learning in communities of practice works well. "For distance education to be successful, high levels of interaction typically need to be present for learners to have a positive attitude and greater satisfaction" (Desai et al., 2006). Methodology in itself is not enough; it must be balanced with content, reflect learning goals, and be carefully structured to ensure progress and measurable results (Ask, Bjorke & Haugen, 2008).

Some teachers insist that synchronous communication is a must for successful online education (see e.g. Jancso, 2008). The DM experience is different: asynchronous threaded discussions can be just as motivating, inspiring, and inclusive, or even more so, at least in heterogeneous, international groups, and can be pedagogically more efficient. Doherty (1998) already claimed ten years ago to have had this experience, stating that asynchronous dialogue gives opportunity for "active participation, in-depth reflection and thoughtful responses". We also found that working in an international network can be successful, adding extra dimensions necessary for studies in a globalised world. This finding confirms similar findings by Schlais and Davis.

A network, by its international design, provides a global perspective much needed by students and their professors to help build a tolerance between people of diverse cultures and value systems. A networked multi-nation educational system facilitated by instructors, coordinated by network administrators and guided by participating institutions will create new and powerful learning opportunities (Schlais and Davis, 2001).

This paper presents and analyzes some of the experiences, challenges and viable solutions of a two-year online Development Management master's degree programme run by the University of Agder in collaboration with African and Asian

universities. The students work primarily online, but also participate in two face-to-face sessions, one at the beginning of the first year and the second at the end of the second semester. The program incorporates the following factors mainly based on the recommendations mentioned above: a socio-constructivist pedagogy, the Norwegian LMS called Fronter, structured and detailed study guides, a student support system with trained tutors, a collaborative learning environment, economic incentives, face-to-face sessions and an implementation of student responsibility.

Several good trends were evident from the beginning, such as low drop-outs (less than 10%), and improved academic skills. However, instructors' experience and student evaluations from the first cohort indicated several challenges; e.g difficult working conditions for the international students, weak links with the partner universities and coordinators, heavy workload and time pressure, lack of streamlined communication, inability to assist all students and problems with enabling group synergy.

Certain improvements were deemed necessary and were implemented during the second and third cohorts. The original pilot programme was institutionalised as part of UIA's regular degree programme offerings. Good and stable connections with the students' own universities through local coordinators were established. The number of assignments was reduced. More time became available for the tutors and course instructors for assisting the academically weaker students. Communication became more streamlined. The recruitment process was improved. 'Contracts' were introduced to clarify expectations and improve working practices in students' groups. Overall, a more coherent and holistic approach to the study programme was gradually introduced.

The Development Management master's programme

In August 2005, 26 students from four countries in Africa and Norway started the master's degree programme in Development Management (DM), with the University of Agder as the academically responsible institution and main implementer. The master's programme in the pilot phase was run in collaboration with the United Nations University (UNU) - Global Virtual University (GVU), under the auspices of the UNU in Tokyo. With the beginning of the second cohort in 2007, DM received funding from NORAD's Programme for Master Studies (NOMA) 2006 – 2010 covering costs for 12 NOMA students from the partner universities. University of Agder's (UIA) main partner in the programme is the University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka; the other partners are Mzumbe University in Tanzania, Mekelle University in Ethiopia, Makerere University in Uganda and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana. Plans have been made to establish a bilateral master programme and /or starting up a completely new master programme in Development Management with the main partner university, Ruhuna in Sri Lanka.

Intake of students is approximately 24 -25 students for each cohort. NOMA supports 12 students from partner universities by providing them with laptops and monthly stipends that enable them to apply for a study leave during the two year programme. The rest of the students are primarily Norwegians, for whom the programme is an ordinary degree programme. A basic requirement for the students is to have at least a bachelor's degree in social science, such as political science, sociology or anthropology and previous knowledge in management, teaching or relevant project work. In addition, the applicants need to have a strong command of the English language, oral and written, and they have to be familiar with the use of PCs and the Internet.

The DM study programme includes courses on environment, management, development and research methods. A serious constraint in many poor countries is the lack of managerial competence. Such competence is needed for the development and implementation of policies and practical solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges. It is recognised both by national and international institutions that there is a need to increase the competence and capacity that can contribute to a positive development process. The DM programme tries to accommodate for that by primarily focusing on management principles, the global environment and development. Numerous interacting factors are analysed and discussed, such as environmental degradation, ICT in development, the gap between the poor and the rich, and globalisation.

Most EU countries (including Norway even though it is not a member of the EU) are committed to the Bologna process, which involves increasing transparency, comparability, interchangeability and mobility of education and students in the EU. One of the main standardisation tools followed by the DM programme is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (European Commission, 2004). One semester contains an estimated 900 hours of work for an average European student. The 'estimated student workload hour unit', is not an exact unit, but a crucial concept in the ECTS. Twenty-five to thirty student work hours correspond to 1 ECTS credit (European Commission, 2004). In order to calculate credits, focus is on student workload, not on the traditional delivery of lectures, contact hours and number of literature pages to be studied. This means that the course development tends to become modularised, focusing on learning outcomes and learner-centred approaches rather than on delivery and teacher-centred approaches (Bjorke 2008). The DM programme is a four-semester, full-time programme covering 120 credits in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Collaborative studies face-to-face and online

The DM study programme emphasises learning as a social activity, and many learning activities are therefore collaborative. The collaboration takes place face-to-face or online in a virtual learning environment created on an e-learning platform. Online learning is unusual to many people, particularly those with a traditional learning background, and participants should expect to spend some time learning

how to function and learn well in a virtual community of practice. Even if the communication is via the Internet, “students still need to actively engage with what is to be learnt, they still have to have ways of expressing their understanding if they are to be confident that they have learnt and they need to feel that what they are doing is worthwhile” (Alexander and Boud, 2001, p.4). The pedagogy, socio-constructivism, has its roots in the ideas of Vygotsky. Several other pedagogues, like Biggs, Bruner, Saljo, Lave and Wenger have added their ideas to this approach since the late 1980s. Socio-constructivism means that the student joins a knowledge-generating community and in collaboration with others solves real problems and assignments in a context as close to reality as possible as part of their study. In a socio-constructivist environment, the teacher will to some extent be a learner together with his/her students, as the generic skills of collaboration, problem-solving and creating new knowledge are important goals by themselves. Everything is up for questioning. The tasks will be processing and assessing information, negotiating meaning and generating and co-constructing new knowledge. Learning is a social activity where the students have to use the information they gather actively by applying it in discussion with others. It is not enough to just state opinions; the students must support their statements by referring to reliable and verifiable sources. The demands to academic rigor are the same as for the more traditional instructivist, lecture-based courses, and formal assignments should in principle be presented as scientific articles ready for publishing. Studying for the sake of studying is avoided. Studies should be undertaken for a purpose, and the participants should critically assess information according to relevance and usefulness in solving the task at hand. This approach to learning has been specially adapted to the global, virtual class- and group rooms where the participants interact and learn.

The Learning Management System (LMS)

During the first week of a face-to-face session at UIA, the students from Africa and Asia are trained in the use of computers and introduced to the LMS called Fronter. In principle any LMS can be used, but Fronter is the main LMS tool implemented at UIA. Asynchronous threaded online discussions are the main communication and interaction tool among students and tutors. The students are also introduced to collaborative learning and some of the pedagogical theories behind it. The Norwegian students arrive at the beginning of the second week and all the students and tutors then work together for the next two weeks, doing the tasks and activities according to the detailed face-to-face programme handed out at the start of the course. They may sit in the same physical room, but much of the interaction takes place in the virtual rooms. A good LMS interface and infrastructure are vital factors for the DM studies. The students need to be able to express their thoughts to develop their subject understanding, and they need to receive feedback from peers and tutors. In addition to asynchronous tools like the threaded discussion forum, brainstorming sessions, and writing on common documents, synchronous tools like chat, messenger, and skype are very useful at times.

After the first face-to-face session, the students leave for their 'home' universities in Ghana, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, various places in Norway and elsewhere and continue working the same way. During the first two semesters, three 10-credit courses run in parallel. Each course is planned to demand between 240-300 hours of student work. This workload is distributed over four months. Each course is accessible continuously 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from course start until course completion. In the third semester there is one 10-credit course, a 5-credit thesis seminar and then the thesis work (45 credits) for the remaining study time. The students, under the guidance of the tutors, together build an online learning environment, where asynchronous, friendly, but critical interaction creates a dynamic group pressure where all are included and all contribute to the learning community.

Student support systems

Support is a crucial part of online learning. "Support includes periodic face-to-face contact, online tutoring supervision, peer support.... feedback on performance, support services and software tools...effective procedures for instructor/tutor/peer feedback are the most important features of a successful online course" (Coomey and Stephenson, 2001, p.39). The DM pedagogical approach: the constructive alignment, the study guide with detailed learning activities, quality assured study sites, the specially trained tutors' close follow-up with feedback and assessments, all aim at achieving this kind of support.

A study guide and calendar with time frames and cut-off dates provide detailed information about the courses at the beginning of each semester. The first year consists of courses in development, management, environment, research methods, contemporary issues and an integrating course where management, development and environment are debated holistically and synergistically. The third and fourth semester emphasise the preparations and writing of a master thesis – building upon coursework and personal experiences, focusing on problems and issues of high interest to the individual student and the societies and institutions they represent. Students conduct fieldwork in a developing country where at least two of the main disciplines – management, development and environment – need to be emphasized. A two year study programme is divided into 8 courses. Each course in turn contains 3-6 modules. Each module has one or more objectives, also called learning outcomes. To achieve a learning outcome, the students are given tasks to learn or understand. In order to meet the requirements of the learning task, the students have to do one or more learning activities. Learning activities can be either individual or collaborative. For each learning activity there are a number of various learning resources supporting the students in their efforts to learn, gain insight and increase understanding. These types of highly structured programmes and courses are obviously quite demanding to develop for teachers and course developers. Making relevant and good learning activities requires high subject competence and creativity, and is usually done in teams of pedagogues, tutors and subject experts.

The assessment methods are based on participation, group and individual assignments, home exams, fieldwork and master thesis. Students have to demonstrate good participation skills in the discussion forum, e.g. contribute with authoritative information, critically discuss the contributions by other students and the curriculum and show independent thinking and analytical skills. Once each semester, the tutor as a rule sends out individual comments on students' participation skills. The course instructor provides detailed feedback on each individual assignment while both the course instructor and tutor comment on the group assignments (each course has approximately four assignments; two individual and two group).

Each partner university is expected to supply the DM students with their own physical room equipped with printer and good online connections, in other words a "quality assured study site". In addition, the university has a special coordinator, functioning as a contact person for the partnership network and taking care of special problems that the students might encounter. The two or three DM students at each university are encouraged to discuss the learning activities among themselves before accessing their respective online group. It is then easier to find a possible national or local cultural perspective before being confronted with the multicultural online group collaborating on producing common documents and other artefacts and reifications of the learning process. The 'quality assured study sites' at each partner university are not compulsory for the students to use, but must be regarded as an offer of extra support. The students choose themselves how much time they want to spend at the university campus. Most prefer to spend much time in their group, but they are free to study from anywhere, as long as they keep the time frames and hand-in cut-off dates. In principle, these study sites function the same way at all partner universities and students in the programme are free to study at any of the partner institutions. Several of the Norwegian students have spent one or more semesters studying overseas. The DM studies can therefore not be regarded as ordinary distance education, because the students study continuously in face-to-face and virtual groups, they are not solitary but are associated with a university campus and encouraged to use the physical university facilities, and they have the support of a coordinator present at their university.

Drop-out rate

According to mid-term and end term evaluations for each course, students report high learning outcomes and that the studies have been surprisingly social, as a rule much more social than ordinary on-campus studies. They also report high group pressure, and that the study has required more work than expected, often more than 40 hours of work per week. The drop-out rate has been very low, ranging from zero to no more than 10% of each cohort. It is interesting to note that drop-out rates at this level in ordinary on-campus studies can reach 40% or more. Online studies commonly have even higher drop-out rates (Simpson, 2002, p.9).

Experiences, challenges and changes – first, second and third cohorts

From separate project to part of UIA's subject offering

The Development Master's programme was initiated with support from Norges-universitetet (the 'Norwegian University') and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) in the autumn of 2005. From 2005 until 2006 the DM programme operated as a project-based pilot programme and the expenses for the University of Agder (UIA) were covered via a special cost budget, i.e. not covered by the ordinary fully financed studies at the university. In addition, the available budget did not cover the costs for full-time teaching positions. In 2006 NOMA became the main financer of the DM programme for the international students, and the study was no longer project based but became accepted as a study programme and consequently part of a full-time study at UIA. More money was put into the programme which gave much more flexibility and acceptance in the university environment and was important for the credibility of the programme.

Partner universities and coordinators

The intake of the first cohort in 2005 was a mixture of "open admission" and the use of already established partner networks (each partner university has its own coordinator that is linked with the staff of the DM programme). Although in principle anyone fulfilling the necessary criteria could apply, the international students were obliged to have some kind of connection with a partner university. The intention was that students would get access to a 'quality assured study site' with their own office at the university with internet facilities, a printer and the possibility of maintaining close collaboration with their local coordinator. However, according to an evaluation of the first cohort of the DM programme conducted by Rye and Støkken (2008), the majority of the international students did not spend their time at the university. This was due to various factors like difficulties with travelling to the university and, more importantly, many of the students felt that their student role was not clearly defined at the university and they were not comfortable studying there. Students trying to work at the university said that they had to find unconventional ways in order to access the university library, internet and a working place. African students were often confined to internet cafés although the majority was given help financially to set up internet connection at home (Rye and Støkken, 2008). UIA was only loosely in contact with the coordinators and the work obligations of the coordinators were not yet established. Communication between the coordinators and UIA was limited and inconsistent, and the progress of the students supported by the NOMA program was not conveyed on a regular basis.

Enhanced contact with the coordinators became possible during the second cohort. First of all, Ruhuna University in Sri Lanka became the main partner university, establishing stronger links with the network as well as expanding the DM programme to also include Asian students. Second, the NOMA funding gave the study

a formal character that enabled a stronger collaboration with the partner universities. Clear policies were made with regard to work obligations and some of the coordinators were involved in developing study guides and work as external examiners. Every year, during the second face-to-face meeting, the coordinators and staff at UIA hold a separate workshop that strengthens the connection with the coordinators and eases the work relations. The coordinators become a natural part of the programme and serve as the primary contact for the students in case of internet problems, access to university facilities and medical issues. Third, since the majority of the NOMA students are already employed at one of the partner universities they have access to an office, a printer and internet. Response from a NOMA student evaluation of the second and third cohorts showed that they have a flexible and predictable environment where they can use the printer facilities as well as connect to the internet via the university network.

Managing the first face-to-face session

The first face-to-face session in Norway in 2005 (first cohort) intended to create a social environment and familiarize the students with the applied e-learning pedagogy, learning resources, and computer technology. However, the process did not run as smoothly as one might hope for. Too many officials were present and occupied with presenting the programme instead of paying due attention to the students. Numerous lectures were given (80% of the time) leading to less focus on the pedagogy and learning processes, the LMS and academic writing skills. And, most importantly, it was not recognised that the students came into the master's programme with different technological capabilities. According to Rye and Støkken (2008), the African students had little knowledge in searching the internet and being familiar with online communication tools. Only a few hours were spent during the first face-to-face session teaching them how to use Fronter, and the majority of the African students could not follow the pace. Although no formal student evaluation was conducted after the first face-to-face session, several discussions with the students and informal complaints indicated that changes had to be made.

The most important change was that the NOMA students arrived one week prior to the Norwegian students. The first week was spent on exercises in Microsoft Word and Excel and a thorough introduction to Fronter including discussing in the forum and handing in a report. Compared to the first cohort, it was clearly observable that students gained confidence in how to use the given tools and that they could easily follow the next one and a half weeks of the face-to-face session, and this is illustrated below.

Response from NOMA supported students after the first week of the face-to-face session (second and third cohorts):

Question

How well were the objectives of the first week of the face-to-face session met?

Response 1:

“Well achieved. It is the introduction to Fronter that was given in the first week that was most vital in ensuring that I found no significant problems in the consequent weeks. The administrative details were well explained. And adequate pointers on how to cope with the requirements of the program were given. So, the ball is now in my court. I either produce results or I perish”.

Response 2:

“The objectives of the first week of the face-to-face session were met to almost 100% success. The programme was organized nicely and all the tutors and professors were good to us making sure that we get the basics on the M.Sc. programme and basics in computing”.

Response 3:

“During the first week I got experience with Fronter. How to access the Fronter and also how to discuss online. Actually dealing with Fronter was new for me”.

After the arrival of the Norwegian students (second and third week of the f2f session), attention was given to programme regulations and policies, presentation of work responsibilities of the staff, the pedagogy, academic writing skills, referencing, information literacy such as assessing sources on the net, time and work management and a brief presentation of the study guides and the semester calendar.

Response from all students after the face-to-face session (second and third cohorts):

Question

Would you say that you have developed your study skills? If so, in what way?

Response 1

“I would say yes, I have extended and developed my study skill due to:
- Other participants' experiences have shown how to look at issues of development differently. - Study approaches have changed and have become a new way to carry out a study course, in this case, using Fronter. - Level of flexibility have changed and gives a totally new approach and experience to adapting to new ways of doing study. - Study skills have changed as well as response to new study skills being embraced by me positively”.

Response 2

“Openness to ideas, understanding the pedagogy of the Fronter and on-line discussions, referencing with focus on the Harvard style and what to include in the masters thesis...how to get started in thinking through a research title and the rest...plus ethical ideas as a researcher since these can impinge one's study”.

Students were now equipped with the necessary capabilities to start working with the courses themselves and, compared to the first cohort, they immediately started discussing and analyzing the given tasks after returning to their home countries.

Workload and course composition

Results from student evaluations of the courses conducted in the first cohort shows that some of the students felt that they were under time pressure due to the heavy workload and the high number of assignments. This is understandable compared with the number of assignments and amount of literature given during the second and third cohorts. In the first cohort, during the first and second semesters, students were taking four courses in one semester, with two courses running in parallel. Each course consisted of 4-6 modules and the number of assignments varied from 5 to 12 individual and group assignments for one single course. First of all, there was no reason for the difference in the number of assignments, since each course consisted of 7.5 ECTS. Second, some of the assignments from the different courses were due on the same day. Third, planning e.g. four 7.5 ECTS courses totalling 900 student work hours, meant that course development had to be coordinated. If one course writer underestimated the number of hours required for the tasks and activities, this course would expand on the expense of the other courses. If the 7.5 ECTS course actually needed 300 hours to complete (in reality a 10 ECTS course), it would “steal” 75 student work hours from the other courses. Some professors tended to consider their course as the most important course (Bjorke, 2008, p. 9). The student workload exceeded the 900 hours allowed, and it became somewhat unmanageable.

In the second cohort a head tutor with a 70% position (increasing from a 20% position from the first cohort) was hired to organize the delivery of all courses. She discovered that the number of assignments, especially for the courses that had a total of 12, could easily be reduced to between 4 – 5 assignments counting towards the final grade. A common calendar was made for each semester where all assignments were plotted and where only one assignment was given each week. A holistic approach was introduced where all courses became more closely and logically connected. Most importantly, the number of courses per semester were reduced to three 10 ECTS courses running in parallel throughout the semester. The master thesis writing increased from 30 ECTS to a total of 45 ECTS, giving students more time to go in depth and increase their time in the field. By increasing the length of the course, students had more time and flexibility for greater analysis and in depth discussions. Comparing the discussion forum of the first cohort with the second and third indicates contributions of improved quality and a higher number of students participating in each discussion.

Working online and streamlining communication

According to Clark (2005), it is necessary to have the course instructors ‘up to speed’ with the online environment. A challenge for professors who develop courses is to balance subject content with development of skills, harmonise learning outcomes, assessment methods and learning methods and generate appropriate feedback to students (Lewis, 1998, p.26). Shifting “policy away from control over the resources and content of education toward a focus on obtaining better outcomes” (Schleicher, 2006), can be a demanding exercise. According to a lecture held by Øyhus (2006), the director of the DM programme, there were clear challenges in

getting used to working online. First of all, email became very easy to use. The students demanded a quick response from the course instructors and program director and the informal tone could sometimes become too “democratic”. Due to its easiness and “roughness”, misunderstandings occurred and the communication was more technical and less personal than in a face-to-face setting. Øyhus called it “the easiness of electronic communication syndrome” (Øyhus, 2006). Secondly, the transparent mode of communication automatically involved students to a higher degree than in traditional lecture-based teaching and sometimes students complained about the running of the program itself and the treatment of other students. Another issue of concern was that the work obligations of the staff were not defined in detail and students received contradictory messages from course instructors and tutors on how to solve group issues, feedback etc.

It became necessary to streamline communication among the staff members and define work responsibilities. The coordinators at the partner universities are, as mentioned above, the first line of contact for international students with any problems, including IT services and health and social issues. Requests from students at partner universities for extensions to deadlines or any deviations from normal procedures must be supported by their local coordinator. Further, each course has a tutor who facilitates online activities and ensures a good learning environment. He or she is the first point of contact with the students in general, and is also in close contact with the NOMA students in collaboration with the local coordinators. Although the tutor was present during the first cohort, it was more clearly conveyed to the students in the second and third that he or she was the primary contact in case of misunderstandings about the course content or other issues related to the course itself. The current rule is that the tutor contacts the course instructor and discusses the issues at hand, and gives feedback to the students. In this way conflicting messages from the course instructor and the tutor can be avoided. The course instructor is academically responsible for each course, including course contents, deadlines, writing ‘minilectures’ and final responsibility for grading. Lastly, the program has appointed a program director, a program coordinator, a course coordinator and a program administrator. The director has the overall strategic and academic responsibility, the program coordinator is the capacity builder in the partner network and the pedagogical adviser on e-learning, the course coordinator oversees and coordinates delivery of all courses and arrangements for exams and the administrator arranges all matters related to rules and regulations, filing of relevant documents and applications, program practicalities and monitoring program budget. Finally, the IT help service at the University of Agder assists in all computer-related matters.

Assisting all students

The defined work obligations of the UIA staff as described above, the reduced number of assignments and the strengthened communication gave the ability for working more closely with the academically weaker students. In the first cohort, much time was given to purely administrative matters, lengthy discussions within

the staff about the programme itself as well as correcting numerous assignments. These issues have not been as prominent with the second and third cohorts, and the tutors have had more time to go into the discussions and assist the students that are struggling with analysing the given literature, and provide feedback on their participatory skills (their ability to collaborate, compose critical standpoints to the given literature as well as give critical and supportive inputs to peers). In addition, course instructors and tutors can now go more in depth on the “poorer” assignments and correct the grammar, structure, content and use of referencing. And as part of streamlining communication, the staff decided on a more or less similar way of giving feedback to students which further strengthened the “common voice” among the staff.

Group dynamics

The socio-constructivist pedagogy demands strong group collaboration, and is one of the fundamental approaches of the master study. To achieve good interaction and group dynamics, it is crucial to gradually build a learning environment where the participants feel comfortable and at home. Professor Gilly Salmon introduced a 5-stage model for implementing this pedagogy (Salmon 2003). The first stage is simply to ensure that all can go online and navigate in the virtual room. The second stage focuses on socialisation. All must get to know each other and develop group cohesion. Third, the participants are trained in searching, assessing and exchanging information. In the fourth stage they construct knowledge by sharing views, negotiating and exchanging meaning, producing common articles and other documents. In the fifth stage they are becoming responsible for their own learning, being self-critical, assessing themselves and using reflective strategies. It is intended that all students reach at least stage four although it depends on everyone being willing to contribute and on tutors continually monitoring progress. If the groups do not function well participants cannot hand in good assignments, or discuss in a fruitful and analytical manner.

However, it is not just about the will of the students but also access to technology and good internet access. It is crucial that the students have regular access to the LMS Fronter. The Norwegian students’ internet access is good, stable and fast. But this is not the case for the Asian and African students. Students in the first cohort used a lot of time finding a location where they could connect to the net since the majority did not have access to an office of their own. Group work suffered and the mixed groups faced frustrations and problems of collaboration.

Although good and stable connections are still a problem for many of the African and Asian students, improvements were made to enhance the group dynamics. First of all, the same groups were kept throughout the whole semester in the second and third cohorts. Students complained in the first cohort about changing the group composition in the middle of the semester. Now the members of the group are well-known and they can plan how to solve the given tasks during the whole semester. During the second and third cohorts, the first planning period of the group started

during the first face-to-face session. The group members also signed group contracts during the first face-to-face session, specifying issues such as the group's mission and goals, duties of the group members, and a code of conduct indicating rules on how the group will solve problems such as unapproved absences from group work. "Freeriding" is an issue of concern, but the group can exert pressure by omitting the "freerider's" name from the group assignments. The fact that the students are working within a socio-constructivist pedagogical framework enables them to draw on each others experiences in a multicultural environment, as the group composition is always a mixture of Norwegian, African and Asian students. Finally, although one 'weaver' is responsible for summarising the contributions from the other members in the discussion forum, all group participants give their support to the 'weaver' by correcting the group document before it is handed in. Moreover, all members in the group have to take their turn as a 'weaver' at least one time during the semester and are gaining experience on how to write a good paper.

Conclusion

There are many challenges when venturing into online education. The unreliable electricity grid in Africa and Sri Lanka combined with an expensive and limited access to the Internet has been a real problem. Measures such as making the study calendar more flexible and strengthening the study sites at the partner universities did improve the situation to some extent, though the problem still exists, giving participants in the rich parts of the world an advantage. The cultural gap between Africans, Asians and Norwegians was fairly well overcome after some months, in particular the much more structured introductory face-to-face session with the focus on learning processes rather than on lecturing was decisive for the improved learning environment. One recurring issue was the challenge of good 'constructive alignment' when preparing the study guides. Few course developers had any experience in making a "curriculum designed so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes that are intended in the course" (Higher Education Academy, 2004).

The carefully constructed study guides have been crucial for the learning outcomes. Also, the coordination of the three courses running in parallel, through a detailed, combined study calendar was very important. The rigid and detailed structure of the study programme planned well in advance of the course start fettered the course instructors to some extent, but gave the students increased flexibility and a practicable workload more evenly distributed throughout the year. One concrete result was that the number of assignments was considerably reduced, giving more time for reflection and better opportunities for tutor and course instructor assistance to the individual students.

It has become very evident that the specially trained tutors are vital. They have seen to the establishment of dynamic group work where all have been included and given equal access. The online learning environment has been social, constructive, suppor-

tive and prompting. Group dynamics have been decisive for the motivation of several of the participants to stay on (Ask, Bjorke and Haugen, 2008) and the partly blended approach, with two face-to-face periods, has probably also been one of the features that has kept the drop-out rate to a minimum. Close and immediate contact with technicians, who would help out with technological problems as far as possible when stretching over continents, has also been important.

The students have completed the study programme with new knowledge, skills and attitudes, making them fit for the labour market. They have become used to working independently as well as in teams and are well experienced in managing their time, bringing projects to completion, reporting and discussing. Students have been well trained in information literacy and assessing information critically and purposefully. After two intense working years on computers, they are at the forefront in computer skills. More importantly, they have been trained in learning how to learn, and cooperate in an international, personal network, and should be well adapted for a changing world, where keeping up to date and life long learning is a necessity.

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