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Carrying Newcastle coals to Amsterdam – a value proposition driven by dedicated resources and an agile spirit – the launch and running of a business and management master’s degree at a new international campus

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Abstract

Effective international management has become an essential ingredient in the development of competitive advantage for large and small and for profit and not for profit organisations alike. The purpose of this paper is to share the experience of launching an existing master’s degree in International Management at a newly formed international campus. The paper looks at the design and implementation processes involved with the MSc Business with International Management degree largely targeted for Dutch conversion (to business) undergraduates seeking to enhance their personal profile and employment prospects. The main issues relating to the success of this project appear to be the speed and agility involved in the setting up, running and management of this project that has led to student satisfaction, fulfilment in teaching, and the strengthening of the relationship between Northumbria University at Newcastle and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences as part of a Memorandum of Understanding involving partnership and investment. In order to make this project succeed there was a need for clear objectives, evidence of both programme content and skills and competencies needs, a committed, competent and strongly led team with network connections and a strong support team. The whole process that is the sum of these elements was put in place to ensure continuous, successful development.

Introduction

The Amsterdam Campus experience involves running the MSc Business with International Management programme on a day to day basis including teaching and mentoring students. This master’s programme was modelled on the tried and tested Newcastle-based programme but then adapted in terms of delivery and other such issues to the context that is Northumbria University’s Amsterdam Campus, to some extent influenced by success at Northumbria University’s London Campus. The programme provides the students with a postgraduate international business and management experience. Students are in the process of learning how to assess and cope with the various international opportunities and challenges. The programme involves an integrated overview of all the major business disciplines – marketing, finance, human resources and operations – leading to a cross-cultural management experience designed to enhance personal profiles of students and their career prospects.

The students are taught by flying faculty from Newcastle, local academics and myself (for semester 1). The flying faculty staff have the experience of teaching largely Dutch (but a few French, German, Swedish and other) students. The cohort size is 35. The students benefit from a variety of teaching inputs and the completion of a residential weekend where they meet other students (from the London Campus) and the facilitators from the company that supplies the training for the weekend. The students are motivated by and dedicated to the programme, creating an energised environment with networking opportunities.

The programme offers a truly international experience for future international managers whether profit or non-profit and provides academic and professional support for study and careers/professional development, opening doors for a career without borders in international management. There is the now accepted use of an LMS (in this case Blackboard) and also the opportunity to link with Northumbria’s Academic Learning Skills (ALS) team via email and Skype. I was seconded to the Amsterdam Campus (early September 2018), principally to lead the MSc programme but also to contribute to teaching on the programme and to coordinate and deliver the Academic and Professional Development module, become involved with peer assessment of local teaching staff and personal tutoring of all students on the programme. The Amsterdam MSc Business with International Management programme was therefore launched in September 2018.

The goal here is to tell the reader (and the conference audience) about the Amsterdam Campus experience during semester 1 i.e. from September 2018 to January 2019, and to explain what it provides, how certain things are measurable, to communicate the USP and explain what is different in terms of an exciting but different and challenging yet pleasurable experience.

Methodology

This article has been written around what can be described as a piece of action research, first developed in the 1940s by Kurt Lewin to respond to perceive problems in social action (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). The research is reflective, inquiring and collaborative and the process allows for interventions and hence change to practice through informed decision-making over time. In this sense the methodological approach taken is a form of case study that uses sources such as documentation and physical artefacts that help create something that is holistic and meaningful to real-life (Yin, 2014). As such the case highlights the solutions to practical, day-to-day issues or problems within a strategic framework that is part of project management, the overarching project being the development of an embryonic, international campus at Amsterdam for Northumbria University.

At the Campus and programme levels, my involvement can be seen as part of my own professional development. This includes elements of the relationship between Northumbria University Newcastle and the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS) and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that has led to partnership, investment, marketing and other activities that will see further developments in the near future such as dual awards. However, the focus of this paper is the first MSc in business at the Campus; its development, launch and subsequent management during its first semester from September 2018 to January 2019.

From an action research stance this can be seen as a cycle of questions, issues and problems that were constantly changing and mutating on a day by day basis where informed decisions had to be made within the overall context of the Campus. This follows an action research cycle of problem identification, data gathering and interpretation, acting on evidence, results evaluation and taking the next steps before returning to problem identification (Ferrance, 2000). The constructivist methodology employed sought to facilitate how things could be done to better impact the student experience. It is therefore about empowerment, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge and social change (Ferrance, 2000). It is not about learning why certain things are done in certain ways. This latter point could well become the focus of other studies that might involve various parties as human subjects but for this paper the focus is on explaining how ownership and accomplishment were achieved by the various involved parties.

Data was gathered from a variety of sources that deal with more complex, higher order issues rather than more simplistic solutions and easy to answer questions, where knowledge acquired could be transformed into meaningful decision-making and action. The collection tools included basic records, notes taken and issues observed on a daily basis and at any meetings attended.

Findings and discussion

The project that is Northumbria University Newcastle's Amsterdam Campus is seen as an enterprise that has been built from an agile spirit and a commitment to investment for the future. There are tangible results already (after only one semester), that define the project as a success in terms of parameters such as financial potential, student satisfaction and aspects of partnership. The project includes the full time MSc in Project Management programme as well as other early developments such as doctoral and other research. The focus of this paper, however, is the first business MSc programme (MSc Business with International Management). From this study there

are themes that emerge from the analysis of the data gathered during semester 1 and the interventions and changes made along the way.

1. What we provide the students with in terms of knowledge. The objective here is to create value for the student in terms of business and international management knowledge that can facilitate original thinking, especially in terms of enabling the students to develop toward their dissertation choice.
2. What we provide the students with in term of skills development. This includes critical awareness of the self and others, team-related issues, transferable personal skills, problem solving and research skills.
3. This is part of the start of developing the competent manager who can impact on the transformation of complex contexts through an understanding of, for example, how teams work and team performance, networking and many other competencies that business and international managers require to be effective in the role.

This was facilitated in the first semester by classroom-based knowledge transference (lectures, seminars, workshops) through the use of talk but also teamwork and presentations. It also included a business simulation (the business game) that is integral to a key strategy module and the residential weekend, integral to a key competencies module. The expectations in terms of learning are that students will learn from each other and develop new knowledge together. This has a resonance with the ideas behind Learning by Developing (for example Raji, 2007; Kallioninen, 2011) where conversion students can bring innovation and creativity into a new (for them) knowledge domain. Interventions in practice during the first semester were minimal in number but included:

Blackboard interventions such as module assessment dates.

Student support interventions to enhance student participation and engagement such as a careers workshop and a software referencing tool workshop.

Classroom teaching and the interactive nature of what is delivered.

Minor adjustments to modules to ensure the postgraduate nature of the programme is maintained.

Conclusions and further research

This paper has developed a simple action learning approach that helps put the MSc business programme in the hands of those running it. This paper reports on clear objectives and how the development and running of this programme during its first semester was led by a strong, dedicated and networked team setup. Knowledge development in this particular HE context has been possible because of extensive experience of delivering the subject matter and of developing skills and (often new) competencies based on many years of experience in dealing with international students. The programme has not only catered to student academic and professional needs and the needs of employers but has also used the Student Support function to great effect in the light of student personal needs and wellbeing.

Further research beyond this initial study will include student perspectives. This is expected to deal with issues such as a consultancy project as an optional choice alongside the dissertation, two year variant choices including advanced practice and study abroad. These entities already exist in the Newcastle Business School provision and are reflective of notions of authentic learning and an emphasis on 'theory to practice'.

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