



DEHUB: A NEW VISION FOR AUSTRALIAN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Summary

The University of New England (UNE) is one of the oldest tertiary Distance Education (DE) providers in Australia. Its reputation for the quality provision of DE dates back almost half a century. More than 75,000 students in Australia and overseas have earned their degree at UNE by distance. UNE has particular expertise in the provision of DE programs designed to meet the professional development needs of people in rural and remote communities across Australia. As a long-established regional university with an exemplary record of scholarship and demonstrated excellence in DE leadership Over the past decade there has been tremendous change in distance education (DE). The potential of the latest generation of educational technologies has remained largely unrealised, resulting in lost opportunities in terms of learning, graduate outcomes, labour market productivity and economic growth. This has been most acutely felt in rural and remote parts of Australia. Without an adequate skills base, regional areas will find it difficult, if not impossible, to adjust to the adverse consequences of long-term demographic and economic trends. UNE has a new vision to establish a Distance Education Hub (DEHub) with the specific aim to develop an Australian research and development agenda for distance education.

Introduction

The University of New England (UNE) is one of the oldest distance education providers in Australia, and has a strong international reputation in this area. UNE has the capacity to respond to the Australian federal government's goal of addressing labour shortages and connecting communities to enhance social inclusion and sustainability of rural and regional settings. UNE already demonstrates how regional communities can be engaged in learning in a virtual, synchronous and asynchronous world through its courses and regional access centres. Distance Education Hub meets the requirement for Australian universities to identify a distinctive strategy that will consolidate sector expertise in the use of technologies and enhance and build upon UNE's reputation for leadership in distance education.

Rationale and scope

As a bold new initiative DEHub aims to provide leadership in undertaking research, developing and implementing models for distance education across the Australian tertiary sector. DEHub intends to engage in national and global collaborations on evidence-based

approaches to new teaching technologies. Following overseas examples, such as JISC (UK) and SURF (Netherlands), DEHub hoping to build capacity across the sector. It will promote innovative modes of teaching and learning that strengthen the capacity of regional universities (UNE, USQ, CQU and CSU) to meet the demands of their distance education students, and that assist rural communities enhance their economic and social sustainability. As partners USQ, CQU and CSU have an opportunity to act as a clearinghouse of knowledge generation and transfer for the benefit of the sector.

There is an absence of a dedicated higher education agency in Australia (such as JISC or SURF) to support the sector on best approaches to learning technologies, to reduce duplication and address student attrition in distance education. Australia is more wired than ever before, but we are yet to capitalise on this infrastructure to enhance access to education. Increasing non-metropolitan participation rates will have high impact, economically and socially, and shift the paradigm of relying on major population centres for basic needs to enhance productivity and sustainability of previously vulnerable communities

1. Current regional and rural participation rates in higher education of only ~20% of the student body compared to ~80% from urban areas (DEST 2004)
2. Absence of quantitative measure that reveals the duplication cost to each institution/agency in trialling the use of technology for distance education
3. 7.23 million internet subscribers. Broadband increased from 2.3 million to 3.5 million between 2006- 2007 (ABS 2007)
4. 30.3% attrition of DE students (Long, 2006) compared to national average of 13% for face-to-face

UNE is well positioned to jointly lead the use of technologies for distance education with USQ, CQU and CSU, thus distinguishing the group from urban campuses. UNE and partners deliver regional students into distinct professional labour market shortages. UNE like its partners are regionally engaged with knowledge generation and transfer in local communities nationally and Internationally, which benefits local and wider economies. UNE wants to influence the higher education sector, and specialise and strengthen delivery of high quality, distinctive distance programs that use technologies appropriately for best practice. 65% of UNE's new commencing distance education (DE) students in 2008 are from rural and regional areas (UNE stats) and 57% UNE DE graduates are employed in regional and rural areas and 76% of them are employed in fields relevant o their qualification (GDS 2007)

Need for DEHub?

Australia needs to invest in a concentrated hub of expertise relevant to the use of technologies. Universities individually expend resources on knowledge generation and transfer when a hub approach akin to AARNET, SURF or JISC could address problems that are similar to all. Consolidation, efficiency and inclusion are required. DEHub aims to provide opportunities for collaboration across Australia and beyond. The approach demonstrates a knowledge generation and transfer model, where a clearinghouse of expertise and opportunity can be drawn upon to improve technology-based learning and teaching.

Sustaining professions in regional areas contributes to the overall well-being of society. Technologies can connect people so that people stay and contribute to their communities. Learners in distance education modes are often workers who do not wish to relocate for study and cannot afford to discontinue employment. Technologies assist education/professional development to be accessible to the most vulnerable. In regions, national and global distance education can provide access; it informs about how engagement can occur when social isolation is present, even in large metropolitan cities.

UNE will promote a collaborative and distinctive advantage with regional partners CQU, CSU, USQ, particularly as the demand and opportunity for distance education increases. Key

stakeholders that will contribute to the DEHub agenda by providing advice or more directly by engaging in research include: JISC (UK), SURF (Netherlands), The Learning Federation, Education.au and Australian Flexible Learning Framework, AARNet and e-Framework for Research and Education. It is intended that this collaboration will enable DEHub to realise efficiency. The national and global collaborations on evidence-based approaches to new technologies will ensure that UNE acts as a clearinghouse for knowledge transfer.

This project will allow UNE to build on an excellent reputation for distance education. Collaboration across the sector, nationally and globally, will provide concrete evidence of impact through a distinctive leadership approach. UNE demonstrates commencing regional student load figures like 65% (2008) or delivery of 57+% of its graduates into regional communities. Our work with accreditation bodies across Australia further demonstrates a capacity to provide flexible education through distance modes for key labour shortage areas. Most of our students are working in their communities as they study. UNE is collaborative and has numerous universities and agencies situated within projects. With DEEWR funding, DEHub can be realized.

Project approach

The methodology of this project is based upon distributed and collaborative leadership. Working groups from the partners will be determined by the expertise required by each component of the project. Decision-making will occur either individually or collectively, as appropriate, but always within a framework of agreed values and priorities. Roles, responsibilities, division of tasks, effective communication routines, timelines, required outcomes and accountabilities will all be clearly articulated at the outset. Fluid leadership arrangements will allow excellent use of the resources (human, physical and financial), will leverage the commitments and capacities of project team members and will aid capacity building across the sector.

The key collaborators (USQ, CQU, CSU) have the capacity to drive the DEHub agenda, and each has indicated their support. UNE and its partners have 46% of all students in external mode courses in 2007. Each has committed in-kind time but formalising the collaboration with full Memorandums of Understanding are a priority in the first phase. Each stakeholder brings unique expertise and experience to inform the development of the three themes, which have a focus around pedagogies effective in using learning technologies: DE Learning, DE Community and DE Research and Evaluation.

Feasibility

DEHub is entirely viable at both conceptual and practical levels. An analysis of need has revealed that while Australia is well-respected internationally for its work in the area of information technologies activities, the knowledge transfer of these activities is disparate and sometimes disconnected within the higher-education sector. It is clear from ABS statistics that Australian households are wired and mobile enhanced, albeit to a lesser extent in some regional communities, but that generational change is certainly having an impact across our country. This provides opportunities to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. Furthermore, Australia has not invested in a 'centre' of excellence that could provide knowledge transfer for the higher education sector about effective uptake of technologies for learning in Australia and with our neighbours in the Asia Pacific region. Internationally, such centres exist. DEHub intends to partially model itself on successful programmes (eg SURF, the Joint Higher Education Systems Committee in the UK <http://www.jisc.org.uk/>). Existing Australian agencies do not cover the landscape of learning technologies in higher education in the manner proposed here. Work will be undertaken in agreeing boundaries,

extending opportunities and creating a highly visible link with the Learning Federation, Education.au and Australian Flexible Learning Framework, AARNet and e-Framework for Research and Education. Currently 130,000 students study by distance modes across Australia. DE is the core business of CSU, USQ, CQU and UNE, who represent the largest cohorts of distance education providers in the Australian sector (46% of all students are in external mode, 2007). They are each well-placed to contribute to the development of a DE agenda that is inclusive and generates knowledge.

In a wider sense, cultural feasibility is also demonstrated through the strategic identification of key stakeholders who have extensive histories and experience in distance education. The distributed leadership approach embraces, rather than excludes, expertise and sits above individual institutions, thereby having impact more broadly across sectors. Furthermore, UNE has considerable experience in the field of distance education (having graduated no less than 75,000 students since its inception). In addition, UNE has been a leader in the use of technologies for supporting and enhancing learning with considerable investment. UNE not only evaluates the use of technology, but has demonstrated implementation and use of technology for learning. DEHub provides a timely opportunity amid other Australian Higher Education Reviews for UNE to position itself distinctly and collaboratively by drawing together expertise to address issues of generational change in connecting communities.

Snapshot of phase of DEHub

The project plan is divided into three distinct year-long phases, starting on 1/12/08 and completing on 1/12/11.

Phase 1 Three themes: DE Learning, DE Community and DE Research and Evaluation

A project manager will provide quality governance. This position will be complemented by academic staff, who will jointly steer the project in association with our key stakeholders, by establishing vision, mission and fully-conceived, achievable and agreed project plans. The team will require administrative and Web programming support for development of a comprehensive website with information, resources and interactive virtual spaces. A reference group will be established. The reference group will steer the development and integration of the evaluation plan. The first task of the academic positions on the team will be to conduct a preparatory scoping of the three themes of DE Learning, DE Community and DE Research and Evaluation. The three themes will be refined through the expertise of stakeholders JISC, SURF, Learning Federation, Education.au and Australian Flexible Learning Framework, AARNet and e-Framework for Research and Education. DEHub will seek to achieve a Memorandum of Understanding with all stakeholders. Two PhD fellows will start immediate work on the "Attrition in Distance Education Research project". And "The student voice research project". This will inform the recommendations for national indicators for attrition of distance education students across Australia.

Phase 2

Inter-university, national and international experts (~20) will then be invited to attend a colloquium in order to workshop the three themes, consolidate the preparatory scoping and finalise the DEHub agenda. They will be invited to present a position paper. A key focus is the impact and outcomes for different target population groups, such as people living in rural communities, when engaging in distance education. Three proposals for substantive action will emerge from the colloquium to enable a comprehensive mapping of Australian DE issues under the three themes. International benchmarking will be conducted. The colloquium will also allow for the development of a sustainability model of DEHub. An International Conference organised by the four partners will back-onto the colloquium so as to disseminate widely and act as a clearinghouse for the outcomes of the colloquium (and conference) but also to capture the number of luminaries for a wider audience and which will

result in a high profile event. This would represent one of the largest and most significant distance education events Australia has seen for considerable time. UNE is also the Secretariat of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA) so is well positioned to undertake this conference and future biannual events. Other activities in this phase include inter-university collaborations, sharing of expertise and collation of evidenced-based use of technologies as key aspects of the pre/post-colloquium/conference phase. Consultation with the reference group and evaluation will be on-going.

Phase 3

Phase 3 is characterized by the consolidation of DEHub and implementation of the sustainability plans. The three substantive projects identified during the colloquium will be completed. Uptake of the recommendations from DEHub will be distributed to higher education institutions through RSS feeds, a subscribed mailing list, an e-newsletter and local, regional and national media outlets in Australia and internationally across four continents. Potentially, such dissemination can reach greater than the total numbers of students and staff at universities in Australia. Partner universities and all agency partners will include information and recommendations in their own reporting structures and networks.

Dissemination will also occur for all key stakeholders and for all partners and will include: a website with easily accessible, quality e-resources, presentations at appropriate fora, such as workshops, seminars and conferences, and research publications in collaboration with partners, aimed at highly reputable DEST-ranked journals.

Conclusion

The significance of this bold project is had on numerous levels, not least that DEHub provides leadership by establishing itself as a clearinghouse for knowledge generation and transfer and pre-empting the requirement to understand and support the use of learning technology across the higher education sector as one response to the Australian Governments digital revolution. The collaboration proposed here across the 'big four' distance education providers has never been previously achieved and this project represents a concerted effort to address similar challenges ensuring economies of scale without compromising competitive advantage. The partners are all regional universities who serve regional communities. The evaluation group and external reference group to ensure productivity and achievement of the milestones. The project will have high impact in steerage of the higher education sector by bringing people together and strategically planning for the future of distance education in Australia. This project is a strategic investment in the field of tertiary educational technologies in a manner as evidenced by the investments made by other countries.