



## **Cross-institutional development of an online open course for educators: confronting current challenges and imagining future possibilities**

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The Global Dimensions in Higher Education module is a fully online open course for educators, jointly developed by three UK universities through a process of consultation and inquiry involving colleagues within the global education sector. The purpose of the module is two-fold. Firstly, to engage academics within and beyond the partner institutions in a critical exploration of transnational and global issues within higher education. Secondly, to provide the project partners with an opportunity to understand and address the challenges of jointly developing and delivering an online course that is to be offered both openly as well as integrated within credit-bearing and continued professional development provision for academics in the partner institutions. This short paper describes progress to date in developing the Global Dimensions in Higher Education module, our current activity focused on validating and implementing the module, and lessons learned to be considered for the collaborative development of open online courses.

Keywords: Online learning, open educational practice, cross-institutional collaboration, academic development, globalisation and internationalisation of higher education

### **Context for development**

The Higher Education sector in the UK and internationally is in a tumultuous period of change, and we see in current debates the need to collectively explore and critique the current state of HE and to rethink the values that inform the educational opportunities provided to our students. Much of the current debate is focused around the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education, and what this might mean for our educational practices, our institutions and the sector. Interestingly while individual institutions are seeking to strengthen their own profile and position within the global HE sector (of which the current MOOC phenomena is a pertinent example), there is a growing recognition and strong governmental direction being given to the importance of institutions working together to meet the needs of current and future learners. Within the UK this has been the focus of both the Collaborate to Compete report of the Online Learning Task Force (2011) established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and of the recent Report of the Review of Higher Education Governance in Scotland (Von Prondzynski, 2012).

Recognising both the need to engage academics in exploring and critiquing current developments in the HE sector, and the opportunities offered by cross-institutional collaboration, Aston University, Edinburgh Napier University, and the University of Dundee have been developing over the last year a new online postgraduate module focused on Global Dimensions in Higher Education (GD in HE). Encouraged by other recent work in the area of online academic development (e.g. Nerantzi; 2011; Gruszczynska et al, 2012), the view being taken is that an online postgraduate module - one that could be used in learning and teaching qualifications and related staff development provision - presents an ideal vehicle for engaging academics (including the next generation of academic leaders) in thinking critically about HE as a sector, how it is likely to change, and how our institutions can remain relevant nationally and internationally. We also believe that by being delivered online, the GD in HE module can offer academics from a range of institutions nationally and internationally a structured and focused online opportunity to engage collaboratively that would otherwise prove very difficult to provide.

## Progress to date

The development of the GD in HE module has been partially funded by the HEA/JISC OER Project as part of Phase 3 (Promoting UK OER Internationally). As an OER the module will first be made available as an open course when it is piloted, and following evaluation and refinement will then be made available to the sector as an OER that can be used to extend postgraduate provision for academics.

From a pedagogical design perspective, the GD in HE module is being developed as a fully online collaborative module comprising the four units illustrated in Figure 1, and featuring a range of digital artefacts (video interviews, podcasts, interactive case studies, digitised texts) and activity descriptors that will support critical engagement with the themes of the module. At the time of writing the development of the module is nearing completion, and will be piloted as an open online course during the academic year 2013/14.



**Figure 18. Interactive mapping of GD in HE module content**  
<http://globaldimensionsinhe.wordpress.com/module-map/>

As regards developing the content of the GD in HE module, and ensuring the integrity and relevance of this within an international context, an educational action research approach has allowed the development of the module to take place within a framework of public and reflective inquiry (Cousin, 2009).

This process has involved project members, and potential international partners and contributors, in a range of reflective activities and joint dialogue including: the development of a project blog where project members and colleagues in the wider academic community have contributed views and material relating to the themes and content of the module (<http://globaldimensionsinhe.wordpress.com/>); reflective logs that have allowed the project team members to document their own self-reflective enquiry; and the development of a case study for the Higher Education Academy to provide interested parties in the HE sector with a better understanding of the challenges and benefits of collaboratively developing joint online provision (Wheeler et al, 2013).

We have carried this 'co-produced' approach (Fenwick, 2012) to the module's development as an OER forward in several other ways, including through gathering an extensive series of 'Global Stories' that feature academics

in the international community providing their view on relevant global issues and dimensions in higher education. These global stories feature on the project blog (<http://globaldimensionsinhe.wordpress.com/global-stories/>) but will also form an important part of the course materials for the module.

Ultimately the GD in HE module is being designed to move participants from a general exploration of key themes and issues through to increasingly exploring them in the context of their own institution, and the context of their own departmental or individual professional practice. The structure of the module, and the progressive nature of activities across the four units, is based on a design framework for technology-enhanced learning that has been successfully applied in postgraduate academic development programmes within two of the partner institutions (Smyth and Bruce, 2012). In terms of delivery, the approach to the facilitation of asynchronous and synchronous activities is being guided by a framework for online student-directed learning (Vlachopoulos and Cowan, 2010) developed by one of the project team and also successfully implemented in various contexts.

## Implementation challenges

The action research and development work undertaken to date for the GD in HE module has led to a number of insights and lessons learned for the project team. Regarding the extent to which OERs can be harnessed and integrated in systems and cultures that were not directly involved in the design and the development process, there have been a number of particularly important lessons learned. One is around the need to address our own assumptions about the extent to which OERs as a concept are understood within the international academic community that GD in HE is being developed for. For example, a contingent of colleagues from Tyumen State University in Siberia, who visited one of the project partners for discussions, were not aware of what OERs were or the open access and potential for repurposing they afforded. Our discussions with other potential institutional partners and module participants have also highlighted possible situations within which staff at overseas universities out with the UK may have limited access to technology for participating in the module. Another critically important issue lies in the extent to which the content and activities of the module itself can provide a balanced, non-parochial set of resources for exploring global dimensions in higher education that is free of bias or culturally-informed assumptions. The extent to which this can even be possible is debatable, but it is an ideal to strive for. Within the GD in HE project blog the project team have addressed 'divisive practices' in globalised education provision, including the 'cultural imperialism' that McBurnie and Ziguras (2009) warn against and within which the offering of programmes informed by other cultural norms and perspectives may undermine important national beliefs and norms relating to education. This is an issue that has also been brought into sharp focus by Professor Kuan-Hsing Chen from the Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies at Chiao Tung University, Taiwan, who in a podcast produced for the GD in HE module addressed the extent to which Western approaches to international higher education can be highly imperialistic in nature.

A critical question going forward then, in both piloting the GD in HE module and in making it available as an OER module to support staff development relating to global issues in HE, is to ask how can we meaningfully internationalise academic development provision through an open online module?

There are also a number of practical challenges in implementing the module that the project team are currently tackling, and which relate to or have arisen from our desire to develop and deliver the GD in HE module as a truly joint online education initiative. The main implementation challenges include:

- Joint approval of the module, so that it can be offered as a jointly delivered open course and also subsequently integrated within our institutional teaching certificate programmes. The risk of not jointly validating collaborative provision of this kind is that each partner may end with a slightly different version of the module based on the recommendations from their own validation panels
- Potential need to restructure institutional policy and regulations to accommodate collaborative online course design and delivery. The three partner institutions all run 20 credit modular systems, so there is already an alignment in notional hours of delivery and levels of activity that would otherwise need to be addressed. However we are aware that the challenge of aligning credit levels, length of trimesters, and expected hours of teaching and learning activity would normally be a significant one.
- Enrolment and assessment of open access versus institutional participants, particularly concerning how open access participants who do not belong to any of the partner institutions can be formally enrolled on the module and subsequently be formally assessed and receive the same volume of postgraduate credit as participants who happen to also be staff at one of the partner institutions.
- Access to licensed resources from across the institutions, as the intention is to try and allow all participants on the module to access online texts (e.g. e-books) from across the partners institutions
- Integration of open platforms of delivery with institutional educational technologies, so that we can

blend a neutral, non-institutional platform for course delivery (e.g. Wordpress, Google groups etc) with other educational technologies from the partner institutions (e.g. virtual classroom tools).

- Distribution of developmental costs and administrative costs and support

## Looking forward

The project team are optimistic about the first run of the GD in HE module as an open course during the academic year 2013/14, and are encouraged by the levels of interest in the module from potential participants, participating institutions, and colleagues from the academic community who have contributed materials or offered their input as facilitators. We are also optimistic about tackling the aforementioned implementation challenges, and finding solutions to them. Our view is that truly joined-up, truly collaborative development of credit-bearing cross-institutional online courses is currently limited by the constraints that institutional policies, practices and systems place on innovative partnership working in the area of curriculum development. As we continue to address these constraints in the final stages of our work on the GD in HE module, we hope that we will have further lessons learned to share with colleagues considering similar ventures.

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