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The Establishment of a Strategic International and Local Partnership through a Masters Level Degree in Information Technology

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The establishment of a strategic international and local partnership through a Masters level degree in Information Technology

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Overview

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- Background to the M.IT
- Aim and composition of the programme
- Blended learning
- Strategic international and local partnership
- Methodology
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Introduction

- Africa still far behind developed countries in the deployment and effective use of advanced ICTs

- In the academic library environment a similar dire situation is experienced

- Lack of sophisticated computers, connectivity, skills and access to the latest research information are just some challenges faced by librarians

- Shortage in required advanced ICT skills to use and to teach these topics at the levels required

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Background to the MIT

- The Department of Information Science (UP), with funding from the Carnegie Corporation, offered a fully funded 2 year coursework degree at Masters Level in Information Technology (M.IT degree)

- The first Intake started in January 2011

- Sixth and final Intake started in January 2016

- 20 students selected per intake from South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania and Nigeria

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Aim of the programme:

- To build capacity and to empower the next generation of library and information professionals to support academics and research

- Intended for middle management level librarians involved in managing ICT or working in ICT-intensive environments, and faculty members

Composition of the programme

- The programme consisted of coursework as well as a mini-dissertation

- Each component carrying 50% of the credits of the programme

- There were 15 lecturers involved in presenting the 12 modules

- Lecturers from industry and partner universities (local & international)

Blended learning

- Due to distribution of students used a blended learning approach : face-to-face lectures & technology-mediated distance education

- Face-to-face lectures:

  – Lectures take place in 4 block periods;

  – University of Pretoria (South Africa), University of Makerere (Uganda), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA)

- **Technology-mediated distance education:**
  - Audio-conferencing using our Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard Collaborate
  - Various social media technologies (Wikis & Blogs)
  - A Facebook group

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Strategic international and local partnership

- The need for establishing partnerships in higher education was addressed by Kofi Annan
  - "I hope that universities throughout Africa will make the most of this opportunity and forge lasting partnerships with their American counterparts"

  (Annan, 2000)

- This need was re-iterated by Ocholla & Bothma (2007)
  - "We also hope to encourage the formation of a network/consortium of LIS schools across partner countries to work collaboratively in areas such as teaching, research, staff and student exchanges, workshops, curriculum development and distance teaching"
- This was realised in 2011 with the establishment of the M.IT programme at the University of Pretoria

Strategic local and international partnerships in M.IT programme

- Local Partnerships:
  - in School of IT (Informatics, Computer Science, Information Science)
  - experts from local industry (CSIR), local libraries (UPLIS, National Library of SA (NLSA) and the UNISA library)
  - lecturers from other local universities (University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Cape Town & UNISA)

Strategic international and local partnerships in M.IT programme

- International Partnerships:
  - USA:
    - USA partner universities (UWM, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Mortenson Center)
    - Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Libraries, various public and academic libraries
  - Uganda:
    - Makerere University & Library, Kyambogo University library, Uganda Christian University library, etc.

Methodology

- **Research Question**: perceptions of lecturers regarding the programme and the perceived value of the partnerships
- **Qualitative** Research Approach
- Data gathering instrument : **Questionnaire**
- Target audience: lecturers involved in the M.IT programme
- **Reflections** were provided by 2 program managers
- A 80% response rate was achieved (12 out of 15)

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Findings

1. Comments on teaching methodologies

Positive:

- Positive comments from 10 of the 12 respondents
- Of these 10, 5 respondents commented on the need and importance of the face-to-face sessions:
  - *"The idea of having face-to-face meetings before embarking on the distance classes was a very good way to start the course - not only to get to know the students but to also form some sort of solid foundation on which to build a further meaningful teaching and learning relationship."*
  - *"I really miss having that contact this year"*

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Negative:

- Negative comments from 5 of the 12 respondents
- 3 of the 5 found the limited time of the online sessions a constraining factor
- Another 2 found the technology frustrating and it was difficult to get students to interact successfully:
  - *"I found the synchronous online teaching painfully frustrating. Students were very slow to respond to questions or to offer comments. Trying to bring about any kind of interaction slowed everything down (awkward gaps) without eliciting much response."*
  - *"The online classes felt (and still do feel) very one sided. It was difficult to get any in-depth discussion going."*

Reflection

- Evidently lecturers prefer face-to-face
- Technology did not allow for synchronous two-way audio
- One-way audio – feedback by typing; could not truly simulate true blended learning
- How to improve engagement and participation?
- Buy-in from lecturers to adapt teaching methodologies to online environment

2. Comments on Information Technology (IT) used for presenting synchronous distance education classes

Positive:

- Positive comments from 10 of the 12 respondents
- Use of Blackboard for the distance education classes as well as the use of Turn-it-in to mark assignments submitted online
- Present from their own office & availability of IT support
- Recording of the sessions, use of Online Chat feature

Negative:

- Negative comments from 10 of the 12 respondents
- Limited bandwidth and connection problems:
  - *"[…] if only bandwidth etc. were up to standard"*
  - *"Regular internet connectivity issues which impacts presentations. This is distracting to both lecturers and students who "leave" and "join" during class due to connectivity failures. Regular connectivity issues can be demotivating."*
- Lack of training:
  - *"Given the difficulties I was experiencing with Blackboard Collaborate and in the absence of training, I was not motivated to try and learn any new tricks, which is a pity because there appear to be features in Blackboard which could have helped me establish a more interactive teaching/learning situation for my lectures."*

Reflections

- Technology would have to improve:
  - expected two-way audio, hoped to upgrade to 1 way video and even 2 way video
  - technology improvement did not happen as fast as envisaged
- Importance of training of lecturers
- Need IT support
- Recordings proved to be very important for student who had connectivity problems to catch up as well as for review purposes

3. Comments on Information Technology (IT) used for presenting face-to-face classes during M.IT lectures

Positive:

- Positive comments from 7 of the 12 respondents
- Use of satisfactory IT equipment in the campus venues

Negative:

- Negative comments from 4 of the 12 respondents
- Distraction of students by available connectivity and IT in venue or their own IT (Social Media, Email)

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Reflections

- How to instil discipline in students to:
  - focus on the content being presented
  - participate in discussion
  - stay away from distractions

4. The use of social media platforms for teaching and learning purposes for the M.IT students

- 5 of the 12 commented that they used social media

- Variety of platforms used: Whatsapp, Wikis, Google Docs, Facebook and Gmail

- 7 commented that they did not use social media

- The reasons for not using social media platforms varied from not having enough time, not knowing how to and not seeing the pedagogical need:

  - *"Time was a further constraint, especially when evaluation of e.g. a number of individual blogs was expected."*

Reflections

- Validity of use of social media as a teaching tool questioned:
    - Tess (2013: A66) points out there is very little empirical evidence in supporting the claim, as most data is restricted mainly to self-reports and content analyses
- Need for integration of social media as an educational tool in teaching and learning
    - training lecturers how to integrate social media

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5. Success of the partnerships in the M.IT programme

- All 12 respondents commented favourably on partnerships formed

- 5 of the respondents interpreted partnerships as being involved with the Department of Information Science

- Others commented positively on the partnership between the lecturing staff and the administrative staff involved in the programme

- From an international partnership level, all the comments were favourable:
  - *"I found this very satisfying and stimulating for the students to experience someone else with different points of view and approach to the subject matter."*
  - *"We had the opportunity to share 'ground level' reality with the students – going beyond theory."*

Reflections

- Levels of partnerships were important to provide the necessary expertise for this broad-based programme
- Lecturers from industries and libraries brought different perspective based on their day-to-day work and practical experience
- This provided a level of reality, as opposed to the theory that can be learnt from text books
- Partners provided specialist knowledge where there was a shortage within our own University

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- Visits to libraries provided further important practical demonstration of IT projects in libraries
- Constraints can be overcome through innovation, going the extra mile and by constantly learning
- Never underestimate the logistical complexity of managing partnerships. These include all levels of partnerships, internally, locally and internationally

Conclusion and the way forward

- Funded program has come to an end
- From 2017 onwards, the programme is continuing as a self-funded programme
- Open to all LIS professionals at middle management level
- No funding for the value-added international visits
- These were recorded during the last funded intake and can now electronically still provide the students with a variety of value-added experiences

Conclusion and the way forward

- Maintaining partnerships:
  - Sufficient internal funding to pay outside lecturers
  - Have to rely on the goodwill of industry partners and other international partners such as the Mortenson Center
  - They have already agreed to continue with their contribution at no cost

- Programme is unique in that it makes use of the expertise and knowledge of the local sponsoring academic institution as well as partner universities, libraries and industries

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Thank you!