
A Dual Master's Degree: An Innovative Model in Distance Education and International Cooperation

Alejandra Parra, M.A.

Resumen

El advenimiento de la tecnología junto con la era de la globalización e internacionalización ha transformado los conceptos de tiempo y espacio, y una de las áreas que está sufriendo el mayor impacto es la educación superior. Este artículo presenta la experiencia de dos universidades –una americana y otra italiana- que han colaborado para aprovechar este impacto de una manera creativa y efectiva, a través de la creación de un programa colaborativo para una maestría de doble titulación. El artículo lleva al lector a través de las diferentes etapas en la implementación del programa así como los desafíos y éxitos que cada institución debió atravesar para llegar al producto final. El resultado es la asociación de dos innovadoras perspectivas presentes actualmente en las filosofías de la educación a distancia y sus técnicas. El objetivo final de este emprendimiento académico es ofrecer una opción profesional que pueda transformar a los estudiantes en “agentes de cambio” tanto en sus respectivos países como en la comunidad internacional de la cual son parte. Los conceptos de cooperación internacional, educación internacional, tecnología, y educación a distancia se unen en este artículo para describir lo que está sucediendo en el mundo de la educación superior, y como la educación a través del mundo puede ser modelada usando modelos de colaboración dinámicos y creativos.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Colaboración - Educación a distancia - Modelos internacionales en educación – Cooperación - Agentes de cambio - Maestría de doble titulación - Tecnología en Educación Superior.

Abstract

The advent of technology coupled with the era of globalization and internationalization that the world is undergoing have transformed the concepts of time and space, and one of the fields that is getting the greatest impact is higher education. This article discusses the experience of two universities –one American and one Italian- collaborating to take advantage of this impact in a creative and effective

way through the creation of a collaborative Dual Master's Degree program. The article takes the reader through the different stages in the implementation of the program as well as through the challenges and successes that each institution had to go through to get to the final product. The result is the association of two innovative perspectives in present day distance education philosophies and techniques and the main objective of this academic endeavor is to offer a professional option that can transform its students into "change agents" both in their own countries as well as in the global international community they are part of. The concepts of cooperation, international education, technology, and distance education all come together in this article to describe what is happening in the world of higher education, and how education around the world can be shaped using dynamic and creative models of collaboration.

KEY WORDS: Collaboration, Distance education. International models in education, Cooperation, Change agents, Dual Master's Degree, Technology in higher education.

Introduction

Education is an ever-evolving field, and as such, the evolution it goes through responds to the many changes and events that are happening in the world today. One of those changes is what technology has done to our lives and the lives of others, mainly in the field of education around the world.

In fact, the advent of technology coupled with the era of globalization and internationalization that the world is undergoing have transformed the concepts of time and space, and one of the fields that is getting the greatest impact is higher education; which has come to operate spatio-temporal boundaries.

The world of today allows universities to form linkages and alliances with each other as a response to the globalization of the markets which promote strategic alliances. Globalization breaks down national borders, reduces national power and blurs the differences between societies (Urry, 1998). Higher education has felt the effects of this globalization which has led to a "process of convergence particularly in the systematization of world knowledge in an infusion of ideas, people and resources" (Denman, 2000, p.3).

Internationalization of education has come about as a result of this globalization and it has been defined as "the process of integrating an international dimension in to the teaching research and service functions of an institution of higher education" (Knight, 1993, as cited in Knight & de Wit, 1997, p.15). As a result of this internationalization, and throughout the past two decades, distance education and computer technologies have grown together into what we now call "e-lear-

ning” (Jalonbeanu, 2003); and the demand has considerably grown and created opportunities for development of new international programs and initiatives.

In this world of change, the above mentioned globalization, technological advances and the rapid growth in the number of virtual online programs and distance education, we can’t help but ask: How are the world universities approaching these changes and capitalizing on their benefits?, What are the models that promote cooperation among universities; and what are the keys to success in the implementation of these innovative models?

One such model of international cooperation is the Dual Master’s Degree in Instructional Technology and Distance Education designed and created as a result of true institutional cooperation between two schools at two universities in two different countries in the world. One of them is an American institution and the other one is a European university. These two schools are the Fischer School of Education at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, United States; and the School of Communication Sciences at the University of Rome- La Sapienza in Rome, Italy.

This program is the result of the association of two innovative perspectives in present day distance education philosophies and techniques. The objective of this academic endeavor is to offer a professional option that can transform its students into “change agents” both in their own countries as well as in the global international community they are part of.

The Universities-Schools involved

Nova Southeastern University (NSU) is a not-for-profit, fully accredited, co-educational institution which was founded in 1964 in Fort Lauderdale, FL, United States. NSU is well known for innovation and quality in both traditional and distance education. NSU is the largest independent institution of higher education in the Southeastern USA and it is the 12th largest independent not-for-profit institution of higher education nationally. NSU is one of 164 colleges and universities statewide, and one of 83 independent four-year institutions in Florida.

As part of the university, the Fischler School of Education and Human Services of Nova Southeastern University provides innovative programs in leadership, teaching and learning, human development, instructional technology and distance education, and communication sciences and disorders. FSEHS offers almost all programs via site-based, cluster-based, and online curriculum delivery in a manner that adapts to students’ work schedules and locations (NSU Website, 2007).

The office that deals with the implementation, design, maintenance and support of international programs is the Office of International Affairs (OIA) which is

involved in several educational projects around the world. The OIA initiates, coordinates, supports

and supervises all aspects of new and ongoing international program development in collaboration with other departments at FSEHS, and with other schools, colleges and centers at Nova Southeastern University. The programs developed by the OIA and offered all around the world go from the undergraduate to graduate and doctoral levels. These programs are delivered online or using an innovative mode of delivery, which combines the face-to-face component as well as distance education implemented online through video conferencing or using interactive platforms such as WebCt. Programs are offered in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, Bahamas, Jamaica, Italy, Greece, Singapore, Malaysia, England, among many other locations.

The University of Rome-La Sapienza was founded in 1303 and it is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Italy. It has more than 147,000 students and nearly 5,000 faculty members. In addition to its main campus in Rome, classes are taught in locations throughout Italy. The university has more than 130 departments and faculties and the School of Communication Sciences at La Sapienza is one of them, providing unique programs dealing with the use of technology in education as well as in the corporate world. Its graduates go on to work in the higher spheres of European organizations and constitute a select group of professionals who stand out in the field of communication and training.

The present day trend for universities to be “less monolithic, bureaucratic and top heavy, more accountable to a variety of stakeholders, more adaptable and more flexible in their delivery” (Hanna & Latchem, 2002) caused these two organizations to enter in contact. This is why in the year 2004, the OIA at the Fischler School of Education started negotiations with the School of Communication Sciences at the University of Rome-La Sapienza with the objective of cooperating in the design and implementation of a dual M.S. Degree in Instructional technology and Distance Education (ITDE).

Dual international degree programs are not common, and their effectiveness is yet to be studied and observed. Nova Southeastern University’s Law School has been offering a Dual Law Program in cooperation with the University of Barcelona, Spain since the year 2002. Other examples of similar cooperation can be the collaborative project in co-teaching an engineering design course across the Atlantic between Carnegie Mellon University in the United States and Delft University of Technology in the

Netherlands (Herder, Turk, Subrahmanian, Westerberg, 2002). Another example of collaboration between higher education institutions is the one between the School of Engineering at Penn State University in the United States and the Institut Universitaire de Technologie of the Université d’Artois in France (Devon,

Richard, Hager, Wayne, Lesenne, Jacques, Saitive & Dominique, 1998). These projects, still up and running, demonstrate an innovative approach; although formal assessments of the effectiveness of these collaborations are yet to be carried out.

In light of these new models, work between the Fischler School of Education at NSU and the School of Communication Sciences of the University of Rome,-La Sapienza began immediately after the first approach in 2004. The goal at that point was to get all the processes and mechanisms together for this dual degree program to happen.

The concept of this dual degree was to work towards a program that would allow its participants to obtain two degrees upon completion of the required courses: one degree from NSU as well as one degree from University of Rome-La Sapienza.

Table 1 provides a more detailed description of the history of this process between the two organizations.

Table 1

FSEHS-UoR M.S. in ITDE. History of the process

M.S. In ITDE-IeLM Master's Degree First Approach-October 2004

- Dean of the FSEHS Office of International Affairs and Italian Liaison start negotiations with different universities in Italy to promote ITDE program
- University of Rome-La Sapienza agrees to meet and discuss options

Meetings and Agreements-January to March 2005

- FSEHS Provost, Dean of the Office of International Affairs and Italian Liaison meet with the Dean of the School of Communication Sciences at the University of Rome-La Sapienza
- An agreement to implement a dual degree program between the two universities is negotiated
- NSU President, FSEHS Provost and Dean of the Office of International Affairs travel to Rome to sign official agreement
- NSU and University of Rome authorities participate of press conference to launch the program in Italy

Steps in the process-March to December 2005

- FSEHS planning team meets and starts designing their portion of the program
- University of Rome planning team meets to start designing their portion of the program
- Both universities exchange syllabi and they go through validation process
- 33-credit program is created with 15 credits delivered by the University of Rome and 18 credits delivered by FSEHS – NSU. Program includes 2-week hands-on face-to-face experience in Florida towards the end of the program
- Start dates are agreed upon
- Student recruitment starts in Italy
- Prospective students are interviewed to assess their English language proficiency to ensure appropriate performance in the English portion of the program
- Admission and American visa processes start

Program implementation processes- April 2006 to April 2007

- Students attend their 15-credit Italian portion of the program delivered face-to-face at the University of Rome (April to August 2006)
- Students attend FSEHS Technology and Library in Italy delivered by FSEHS staff
- Students start their 18-credit portion of the program delivered online (September 2006 to April 2007)
- Students travel to Florida for their two-week stay and conclusion of the program (April 2007)
- Students present their final projects and submit their Professional Portfolio (degree exit mechanism) in Florida.
- Students attend a graduation ceremony in Rome attended by Italian and American authorities.

Program Maintenance processes-ongoing 2006 to present and future

- University of Rome-La Sapienza administration supports processes of application, registration and counseling for Italian portion of the program through School Dean, Program Director, Coordinator and Italian Regional Liaison.
- FSEHS administration supports processes of application, registration and counseling for USA portion of the program through OIA's Dean and Associate Dean, Lead and Adjunct Professors, and Regional Italian Liaison.
- University of Rome and Italian Regional Liaison
- University of Rome and Italian Regional Liaison in cooperation with FSEHS OIA's Dean and Associate Dean continue efforts to promote and recruit students for next program with start date April 2007.

Target Audience

The target audience for this program is composed of Italian students seeking a dual graduate degree in the field of Instructional Technology and Distance Education. Interest in a degree of this nature reflects the reality that in recent years the Italian student population has been demanding “an organization for teaching and learning activities that are more attentive to their emerging conditions. This target audience, as a result, is enjoying now a broader offering of academic programs, a greater geographical coverage and a differentiation of educational pathways” (Finocchietti, 2004).

Description of the program

In this 33-credit program Italian students take their first 15 credits over a 5 month period in Italy at the University of Rome using a blended delivery mode. This mode of delivery incorporates face-to-face sessions as well as online written interaction in the way of chat rooms, interactive websites or learning objects. The courses delivered are designed at the University of Rome by local instructors and the language of instruction is Italian.

Upon completion of these courses in Italy, students start the FSEHS portion of the program consisting of 18 credits (8-month duration). This portion of the program is delivered online using the NSU interactive WebCT platform with its Illuminate component which allows for audio as well as verbal synchronous interaction. These courses lead to a final stage in the program: the two-week residential stay in Florida at the NSU campus. This residential stay is considered the “capstone” of the program or the final requirement for graduation. During these two weeks students take face-to-face classes in the morning and they use the afternoons to finalize their course work and submit their Professional Portfolio which is their graduation or exit mechanism. The language of delivery for the online courses as well as for the two-week experience in USA is English. The group then goes back to Italy, where they receive their final grades and attend a formal graduation ceremony attended by the Italian university authorities as

well as FSEHS members who travel specially for the occasion. As they complete the program, students receive two degrees: an American M.S. degree (from NSU) and an Italian M.S. degree (from the University of Rome).

Academic Validation-Program Articulation

The academic aspect of this dual degree program and the higher education level of the courses included in the degree was guaranteed through a course validation process at both institutions to ensure academic consistency and quality. The ITDE faculty received the translated versions of the Italian syllabi that were to be used in the delivery of the first 15 credits in the program. Likewise, the faculty members at the School of Communication Sciences received the FSEHS's syllabi to be reviewed and to determine if they would be at the level expected by the Italian university. Once this process of validation concluded, an Outline for the degree program was designed and a program schedule agreed upon. Table 2 shows the outline of this degree program.

Table 4

	Completed	Course Title	Credit
		Required Core Courses	
1		EDU 5000 Interactive Technology for Graduate Education	0
2		ITDE 7005 Instructional Media	3
3		ITDE 8001 Introduction to Instructional Design	3
4		ITDE 8002 Instructional Design	3
5		EDD 8012 Managing and Evaluation ITDE	3

	Completed	Course Title	Credit
6		EDD 8123 Advanced Applications in ITDE	3
7		ITDE 6000 Reflective Portfolio	3
8		ITDE 8018 Elements of Multimedia Publishing and Work Organization *	3
9		ITDE 7017 Elements of Multimedia Computer Science, Hypertexts and Web Writing *	3
10		ITDE 7016 Developing Multimedia Interactive Objects Conforming to International Standards *	3
11		ITDE 7015 Planning, Delivery and Evaluation/Quality Certification *	3
12		ITDE 7015 Hardware and Software Tools for eLearning *	3
		Total Credits Required for Degree 3	3

Outline of FSEHS and UoR M.S. in ITDE Program.

The Dual Master's Degree-The Experience of the First Edition

The students that enrolled in the first edition of this dual Master's Degree in ITDE that started in April 2006 come from the corporate, educational as well as the technology fields. They are students in their 20s and their early 30s. All of them hold the equivalent to American Bachelor's Degrees in related fields. Out of the 12 participants in the first group, 8 of them work full time and the others are full-time students who are planning on getting a job related to their studies upon completion of the program.

The team that worked on the creation, implementation and support of this program consisted of the Italian team of directors, faculty and coordinators at the University of Rome's School of Communication Sciences as well as the Fischler School

of Education's team. The FSEHS's team consists of the Dean and Associate Dean of the Office of International Affairs, the team of ITDE faculty, and the important and crucial figure of the European Regional Liaison, who coordinated the recruitment, promotion, logistic as well as academic support of the program at all times. This regional liaison resides in Italy and also traveled to the United States with the first edition students for their residential requirement to ensure a seamless process from beginning to end of the experience.

Students started their Italian portion of the program in April 2006 to continue on to the American part of the program that started in September 2006. This part of the program was delivered totally online using the NSU WebCT Platform with its related supplementary interactive programs Elluminate and Horizon Wimba. Prior to beginning the second stage in their program, the Fischler School of Education sent the Distance Library specialist to give students the orientation and guidance they need to become the true distance students that FSEHS expects them to be.

The two on-campus weeks, corollary of their program, took place in the month of April 2007, and the experience that students lived was priceless. Being distance online students and then becoming face-to-face participants in the learning experience and also getting to know their professors in person constituted an important milestone of their program, which in turn contributed to the hands-on experience they had as a program requirement in order to finish their projects, assignments and portfolio. The technology and infrastructure the program participants had at their disposal at the university really helped them take advantage of the academic

experience as well as the cultural understanding in a totally new and different country.

As a conclusion to their program and requirement for graduation, students submitted their Professional Portfolio at a special meeting with the professor assigned to that project. Likewise, their final projects were presented at a special session attended by the faculty of the ITDE program as well as guests invited for the occasion.

Conclusion

The organizations involved in this dual Master's Degree in ITDE expect to offer the program for many years to come. In fact, the program is already in its second edition. Adjustments need to be made to some areas of the program such as the ongoing communication between Italian and American faculty; student training in time management and organizational skills; and training in the differences in educational systems and methodologies between the two countries, among others. Although a more formal assessment would be needed, the program has the potential to become the answer to the needs of a new field that is rapidly emerging in Italy and in Europe; and it also has the quality and characteristics that make a difference from other programs offered in Europe and the United States. It is the objective of both universities to keep working in close cooperation in order to improve and update the program as needed.

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Italian Students and NSU team of Faculty and Coordinators.