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International Collaboration of Distance Learning Universities for Online Learning in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesian higher education must improve its enrollment as well as its quality. One possibility for improving the quality of distance learning universities is collaboration with foreign universities. This paper discusses models for international collaboration among distance learning universities. However, there are also several problems that may result from collaboration. As a consequence, the model of collaboration should include joint development of curriculum, quality assurance, and appropriate technology.

Indonesian higher education is facing a challenge in improving quality as well as broadening access. According to Moeliohardjo (2010), much effort is needed to improve the quality assurance system, qualification of teaching staff, research activities, and global ranking of Indonesian universities. The author also discovered that the Gross Enrollment Rate from 2008 is 17.5%, which is lower than that of China (20%) and Thailand (50%) (Moeliohardjo 2010). Both improving quality and broadening access have to be conducted simultaneously.

A significant part of the Indonesian higher education system is distance education. Distance education has advantages in allowing students to study regardless of geographical barriers, family and job responsibilities, age, and flexible learning activities (Zuhairi et al. 2009). This advantage is evidenced as 11.58% of total national higher education enrollment is within the distance education institution. In Indonesia, the first and primary distance education institution is Indonesian Open University (Universitas Terbuka), which was established in 1984.

Online learning is necessary for improving learning quality in Indonesia, especially in distance education, and for providing more access to education. Students may access more information through the internet; they can communicate faster with their teachers and other students. In addition, online learning allows students to be involved in collaborative learning activities regardless of national borders (Boltuc 2008). Online learning means that Indonesian students may learn collaboratively with students from other countries without having to leave their home country.

Although online learning is necessary in Indonesian higher education, its growth is still limited by some obstacles. Funding and availability of qualified experts are major problems for online learning development in Indonesia (Ali 2004). Moreover, internet infrastructure is not always available throughout the archipelago of 14,000 islands (Pannen 2004). As a result, universities need to develop ways to provide more efficient online learning.

Establishing an online learning program requires expertise and resources which are not always available at each university. Therefore, inter-institutional cooperation will maximize the

utilization of resources and expertise (Lasseter 2008). The cooperation includes not only developing an online learning system, but also developing the curriculum. Lasseter (2008) asserted that the most critical factors for inter-institutional collaboration include funding, operation of the program, and curriculum development.

International collaboration is conducted by institutions with distance education to improve their online learning program. International collaboration is defined as an activity of two or more institutions or universities in different countries conducting a joint program in connection with a common goal (Lassater 2008). For example, some distance learning universities in different countries are involved in joint education programs. Five South East Asian open universities in different countries collaborate to develop a Master's degree in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Studies. Similarly, universities in the Caribbean collaborate in distance learning.

However, there is a gap in research about what model can best serve the needs of students. No research currently exists regarding the international collaboration for online learning in Indonesia specifically. Moran and Mugridge (1993) pointed out experiences of collaboration in distance learning, but the authors did not elucidate on collaboration for online learning. Although less detailed, Claffey (2002) provided examples of models of collaboration for distance education institutions in online learning. It included international collaboration for developing countries.

This paper focuses on developing a model for conducting international collaboration in online learning among distance education institutions. As a result, the paper will discuss models of collaboration which allow participation of teachers from developing countries to share knowledge gained during collaboration activities. The models are based on Claffey (2002) and Miller (2011), and they include learning material, student support, quality control, and organization. In addition, the paper also discusses the definition of distance learning, online learning, and models of international collaboration among distance education institutions. To begin, there will be a discussion about the benefits of international collaboration. A description of a few models and examples of the international collaboration will follow. Finally, there will be a discussion about a suggested model of international collaboration.

Benefits of international collaboration of distance learning

There are benefits to international collaboration for distance education institutions in developing countries, which include increasing the skills of teachers, providing broader knowledge for students, and reducing cost (Margulus 2001; Keyter 2002). Collaboration may support distance learning institutions in maximizing their online learning activities across national borders (Boltuc 2008). Marett (2006) described two levels of the collaboration. The first is the collaboration among students of different universities, while the second is the collaboration of institutions to jointly develop a distance learning program. Similarly, Moran and Mudridge (1999) pointed out that the collaboration includes joint operation and sharing of learning material, skills, and quality improvement activities across different universities.

For students, collaboration enriches their learning experience. Zaitseva (2004) said that international collaboration in online learning fosters critical thinking, reflection, improvement of foreign language confidence, and cultural awareness among the students. Therefore, the students receive not only a better quality of learning material developed jointly by faculty, but also a learning community of students from other countries.

Distance education is conducted where teachers and students do not meet in face-to-face learning activities regularly. Instead, they engage in non-contiguous communication. The non-contiguous communication means that teachers and students may interact, though they do it in separate places. There are various modes of non-contiguous communication in distance education, for example, printed material, printed mail, telephone, internet and email (Ascough 2008; Harrington and Reasons 2005; Holmberg 1995). The internet is now becoming more crucial as a result of advancement in information and communication technology.

The use of the internet in distance education is quite important, since it allows students to communicate faster and take advantage of more flexible ways of learning, which is an effective pedagogical method to cover students' tertiary education across 14,000 islands of Indonesia (Pannen, 2007). In addition, the internet also provides students with collaborative learning opportunities. Burns (2011) pointed out that the use of the internet in learning activities in online learning is the most dynamic mode of distance education. The author stated that in most developed countries, online learning also means distance education. Improving availability and quality of online learning are indispensable for distance education, even in developing countries.

Despite its benefits, the development of online learning is still not growing at an adequate pace, especially in developing countries. In Jamaica, 59% of students in a particular course do not have internet access at home (Marrett 2006). Ali (2004) stated that the lack of qualified teachers in developing and conducting online learning is one obstacle in Indonesia. The teachers are responsible for preparing the educational material. In addition, teachers supervise the online learning activities. Without qualified teachers, the implementation of online activities is not optimum.

Universities that are involved in collaboration can improve their quality of teaching, learning, and research. Salmi (2009), Boud (2006), and Diki (2009) suggested that international collaboration benefits universities in developing countries with world-class academic activities, which are a means of sharing expertise and transferring knowledge and experience.

Models of collaboration

There are several models of collaboration among distance education universities. Some models were suggested by Claffey (2002) that are conducted between United States universities and partner universities in other countries, including developing countries. Those models include the contractual model, enabling model, and multiple alliance.

In the contractual model of collaboration, one institution provides learning material to be used by other participating institutions. Other institutions involved in the collaboration are not part of the development team. As a result, this model of collaboration does not provide opportunity for multi-directional sharing of expertise across participating organizations. In the enabling model, a lead organization supports other universities to redesign each one's own curriculum. The enabling model of collaboration is meant to improve the capability of each member in online learning. Claffey (2002) argued that it requires a lead organization to coordinate activities. Each university develops its own course design and student enrollment, while the lead organization is responsible for quality control and funding. Another model is multiple alliance. This model is designed for more diverse member organizations. According to Claffey (2002), the collaboration may include multiple sources of funding and cross-organization student enrollment. Credentials are given by the lead organization.

While Claffey (2002) described models of collaboration based on the level of activities of each institution, Miller (2011) suggested models of collaboration based on types of activities of each institution involved. The authors defined several models: sharing students, sharing courses, sharing materials, and serving mutual client organizations. In the model of sharing students, several institutions develop and deliver online courses in a joint degree program. Students register at one university but the courses are available at all universities (Miller 2011). This model is similar to Claffey's enabling model (2002). Collaboration for sharing courses is an opportunity for students in a university to take online courses at other universities. Students are registered at each university (Miller, 2011). As opposed to the model of sharing students, only certain courses can be taken by students at the collaborating institution.

The collaboration of sharing material is conducted through Open Educational Resources (OER). OER is a database of open and free online learning materials produced by faculty members. Although there are concerns about unique cultural contexts, this can be overcome if teachers can clarify and elaborate the content according to the local context (Miller 2011). For example, teachers may explain that certain aspects of the material are more important in that particular country. The model of serving mutual client organizations is a collaboration between institutions or universities to provide online learning services for several companies that have employees that need the educational program. A benefit to this model is that the companies may provide the educational program for their employees that live in different countries (Miller 2011). The employees may study in the distance learning program in the country where they live.

An example of international collaboration in developing online learning is the Hylite program in Indonesia. Although it is conducted in Indonesia, it is coordinated by Seamolec (South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization for Open Learning Center). This is an online program for a mass distance education program. Pannen (2007) explained that the underlying idea for Hylite is the need to train 1.1 million teachers with a Bachelor's degree in Education. The large number of teachers in the training program requires distance learning as opposed to a face-to-face program. When it was established in 2007, there were 23 Indonesian universities involved in this project (Pannen et al. 2007).

The role of the lead organization for the Hylite program is quite important. Seamolec is the lead organization for this collaboration, and its role is coordinating issues like developing the learning management system (LMS) and quality control. However, although Seamolec is the lead organization for the program, it does not provide the funds for the collaboration. Instead, the Government of Indonesia provides financial support, with some World Bank contribution (Pannen 2007). The situation is different in the enabling model of Claffey (2002), which defines the lead organization as the one providing the funds for the project.

In South East Asia, five open universities from Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand are developing a joint program in ASEAN Studies. Belawati (2011) stated that the curriculum is developed by faculty members of all participating universities, who are responsible for delivery and maintenance of the course. This model is an example of both Claffey's (2002) enabling model and Miller's (2011) model of sharing students.

Other international collaboration takes place in the Caribbean, which demonstrated an example of a collaboration among different countries with different national languages. Marett (2006) discussed CUPIDE (Caribbean Universities Project for Integrated Distance Education) for improving higher education in Guyana, West Indies, Jamaica, and Haiti. The author said that collaboration among distance learning institutions in Caribbean countries is necessary, given the small size and population of each country. There are at least 38 collaboration programs in the

area, mostly delivering online programs from overseas universities by proxy local universities. As most of the collaboration is based on using curriculum developed by overseas universities, this is an example of the contractual mode described by Claffey (2002).

Although there are benefits to this type of collaboration, previous research shows that there are some problems with collaboration. One is different languages (Marsett 2006). As the collaboration includes universities, companies, teachers, and students in different countries, a language barrier is unavoidable. Additionally, Lasseter (2008) found out that organizational procedures, software/technology, course development, quality assurance, student management, social and political relationship, and content delivery were the most important problems. Meanwhile, ICDE anticipated problems with differences of language and culture and differing standards of quality (ICDE 2011). In other words, the most common problems of collaboration are caused by the different socio-cultural aspects of each country represented in the participating distance learning universities.

Suggested Model of Collaboration

Based on the experience of the previous collaboration projects among institutions, and taking into account the resulting problems, this study suggests another model of collaboration, based on the enabling and multiple alliance model (Claffey 2002). Examples of the application of these models are the Hylite and ASEAN Studies program. Joint development of learning material is the most important activity in the model. Faculty members of each university are assigned to develop the curriculum and learning material, and they are involved in the tutorial and learning support activities. Those models are the most suitable for sharing experiences and improving the capability of each university teacher.

Joint development of curriculum is a crucial activity within the collaboration. As it is a joint activity, it may provide an opportunity for teachers to broaden their perspectives and share knowledge, which is suggested by Salmi (2009). The curriculum will be most suitable for those universities, since it is developed by faculty members from the participating universities. Therefore, the enabling model of Claffey (2002) is the most suitable, since the model includes joint activities for developing curriculum.

This model of collaboration includes developing learning materials and learning support (Lasseter 2008). Additionally, there must be a proper choice of technology to support collaboration. For example, mobile technology may increase flexibility for learning, while Web 2.0 is a tool for collaborative learning (Burns 2011). Those new technologies may improve learning activities. However, the choice of technology is also influenced by the technology being used by students. Ali (2004) showed that internet infrastructure in Indonesia is not always reliable. For example, not every island has an internet connection, not to mention the problem of low bandwidth connection.

Quality assurance is also important for this model of collaboration. Pannen (2007) and ICDE (2011) suggested the importance of quality assurance to make sure the program achieves the goal. In the beginning, the collaborative program must have a definitive statement of purpose, with a formal acknowledgment of the benefits and responsibilities involved for participating members (Miller 2011). Cooperation with a government agency for supervising quality can be included in the program (Sharma and Chaudary 2003). Each participating institution, as well as the lead organization, may track the achievement of the collaboration based on the quality assurance effort.

A defined grading system is required for the collaboration. McCurdy (2006) suggests the same, as the program involves universities with different grading methods. The joint grading system must allow students who take courses in different universities to have similar grading systems.

Finally, as the collaboration may include countries with different languages, there must be a way to avoid language barriers. There must be different levels of interactional activities among students with different language skills. Meanwhile, teachers need to encourage students to interact within the collaborative learning activities (Zaitseva 2004). Therefore, teachers tutoring or moderating the online learning activities are responsible for fostering active participation of students.

Conclusion

The model for international collaboration among distance education institutions should focus on joint development of learning material, appropriate choice of technology, and quality assurance. In order to support the learning activities, there must be some preparation for students who have limited language skills for communication with other students. Moreover, the online activities should be conducted using the available technology that both teachers and students may use, especially in developing countries.

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