3rd World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership (WCLTA-2012)

# Faculty development in a flexible learning context

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**Abstract**

It is an acknowledged fact that universities must ensure the provision of supportive mechanisms to assist faculty members to remain updated and to be as productive as possible in order to maintain the quality of learning. Recognizing this essential reality, institutions world-wide have responded to the challenge by establishing a range of faculty development programmes with the common goal being the development and growth of the potential of their teaching resources by using them in creative ways. The provision of faculty development in flexible learning contexts for working adults which rely largely upon associate or part-time faculty members represents an even bigger challenge. A flexible learning mode, combined with a comprehensive integration of IT and aspects of virtual learning, sets a high premium on the exploitation and expansion of media and technology to strengthen the teaching / learning experience and to help students to learn at their own pace. Hence, a crucial function of the faculty support mechanisms set up in such institutions is to help academic staff members to provide quality learning by utilizing technology to facilitate delivery and to integrate appropriate and productive forms of communication with their students. Using the Singapore SIM University (UniSIM) as a backdrop for this study in faculty development, this paper aims to explore how institutional faculty support mechanisms have been and are being developed to ensure a rewarding teaching-learning context.

## 1. Introduction

Given the radical changes that characterize the world in which we live today, it is increasingly a challenge to maintain the quality of learning. Academic staff must needs remain updated in their subject areas, effectively utilize technology to facilitate delivery, and integrate appropriate and productive forms of communication with their students. Universities all over the world recognize this essential reality and strive to provide supportive mechanisms to assist faculty to be as productive as possible. Hence they establish a range of faculty development programmes with the common goal of developing the potential of teaching staff in creative ways.

Universities with fulltime faculty members typically interpret the term "faculty development" to include advice and training in a number of areas related to teaching, in-class presentation skills, assessment and evaluation of students, and extending to career planning and professional development in scholarly and

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administrative skills, as well as to funding for participation in conferences, for research and publication and the grant of sabbaticals. What is more challenging though is the provision of faculty development in flexible learning contexts for working adults which rely largely upon associate or part-time faculty members. The flexible learning mode, combined with a comprehensive integration of IT and aspects of virtual learning, sets a high premium on the exploitation and expansion of media and technology to strengthen the teaching / learning experience and to help students to learn at their own pace. Hence, a crucial function of the faculty support mechanisms set up in such institutions is to help academic staff members to provide quality learning by utilizing technology to facilitate delivery. Using the Singapore SIM University (UniSIM) as a backdrop for this study in faculty development, this paper aims to explore how institutional faculty support mechanisms have been developed to ensure a rewarding teaching-learning context.

## 2. Background: Singapore

As a small city-state (about 700 sq km in size), with a global outlook, scant natural resources and a lively landscape of East-West collaboration in higher education, Singapore lays great emphasis on the integration of technology with education. The World Economic Forum Report over the last few years has regularly ranked Singapore amongst the best in terms of IT readiness and IT as a factor of national competitiveness. The national goal is to foster an engaging learning experience through the innovative use of infocomm technologies to meet the diverse needs of learners in Singapore and to attract global talent to educational institutions. There is an explicit focus on education, new technologies, research, creative thinking and lifelong education. At the same time, maintaining high standards is an integral objective of the development strategy of universities in Singapore. The educational ethos, the institutional culture and the overall national agenda all combine to ensure the successful implementation of information technology as a learning resource.

## 3. SIM University: An overview

The success of any institution involving continuing education and lifelong learning hinges crucially on its ability to meet evolving needs. SIM University (UniSIM), Singapore's only university for working adults, recognises that changing demands have a significant impact on the curriculum, pedagogic approach and the teaching and learning environment. The student profile at UniSIM is different from that in the other universities at Singapore which cater primarily to school-leavers. The learners are adults, in-service and possessing heterogeneous prior knowledge, as contrasted with their counterparts in mainstream education. The programmes are aimed at giving working adults another opportunity for tertiary education and self-development. A majority of the students at UniSIM fall within the 25 to 35 age group, and all must either be employed or have at least two years of working experience. In terms of occupation, students belong to professions ranging from teaching to administrative jobs to security services, and from electronics to management information systems to marketing and sales. UniSIM offers them an opportunity for continuing education and lifelong learning to impart new capabilities and knowledge through the judicious use of technology.

SIM University offers a range of over 55 tertiary-level programmes through four Schools: Arts & Social Sciences, Business, Human Development & Social Services, and Science & Technology. The curriculum and pedagogy are designed to suit adult learners who have certain skills, but who are motivated to acquire greater breadth and depth of knowledge to improve competence, enhance career potential or simply realize their dream of getting a degree. The flexible learning environment allows them to learn at their own pace, place and space. Courses are designed to suit the demands of the busy executive who has to manage career, family and social obligations. These courses have been meticulously researched and carefully constructed for independent learning. Course assessment at UniSIM comprises two major components: continuous assessment (CA) and an end of course assessment (ECA) which could be an examination or a project. Students must pass both components (CA and ECA) to pass their courses. Continuous Assessment is usually completed away from a classroom setting and may take various forms such as instructor-marked assignments, individual projects or

papers, group projects, or on-line quizzes. Courses are delivered through a combination of face-to-face sessions and the electronic medium.

The role of the associate (part-time) faculty makes considerable demands on those new to flexible learning in terms of instructional strategies, modes of communication and dialogue as well as attitudes and values. As associate faculty, they need not only to be immersed in new, student-centred pedagogies but also to embrace a commitment to an enhanced use of technology to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes. Thus the major challenge which the learning model at SIM University poses is how to how to keep the associate faculty updated and in tune with best teaching practices so as to ensure the standards of teaching, how to enable them to use e-learning resources in an effective and rewarding way, and how to sustain their motivational level.

## 4. Associate faculty development

SIM University meets this challenge by focusing on faculty development for the part-time academics through a range of institutional support mechanisms to help them meet the demands of this new role. In particular, the focus must be on professional development of the faculty beyond initial classroom preparation to the use of e-learning resources because of the implementation of electronic lectures and online course content.

Bates refers to three types of academics that cause him grief: "ostriches" who believe only in the Socratic dialogue or the traditional face-to-face teaching; "geeks" who are very enthusiastic about technology but do not lay emphasis on teaching; and "amateurs" who love teaching but have no knowledge of education or instructional design or of the educational applications of new technologies. The 700-strong UniSIM associate faculty would have individuals from different backgrounds and varying interests including the types mentioned by Bates. They are drawn either from the local higher education institutions or from industry and are carefully selected on the basis of their knowledge and expertise in the subject discipline and their understanding of the challenges confronting adult learners. The adequacy, indeed the success of staff support activities, is determined by their relevance to staff needs as well as to the educational ethos of the institution, and the extent to which it can take account of the different backgrounds of the faculty as well as address their diverse responsibilities. For this reason, a training plan has been designed to help the associate faculty to further develop their expertise through a variety of means and to more effectively fulfill their responsibilities be they related to teaching or to development of course materials.

All appointed associates receive or have access to appropriate induction materials which address topics on UniSIM background and its flexible learning context, and on the roles & responsibilities of associate faculty. All new associates need to successfully complete a slate of mandatory training e-modules intended to help them adapt their skills to the unique teaching-learning context of UniSIM with its adult learner, and to ensure that they have acquired the necessary skills. At the outset, they are trained in the learning management system [MyUniSIM] which covers features of Blackboard that are customized for UniSIM such as how to download students' assignments for marking and grading, record students' grades, handle plagiarism reports returned by the Turnitin software, access guidelines on marking assignments and the mechanics of online grading and the provision of detailed annotated feedback on the students' submitted softcopy assignments. Training is also provided on the use of technology for the management and facilitation of discussion forums to improve the student learning experience (guidelines are shared on the optimal use of the online discussion boards so as to encourage student participation) and on conducting online instruction via a briefing on the theory followed by workshops and hands-on practice. Course-specific training conducted by experienced faculty provides new associate faculty guidance on how classes should be structured, which topics to address, the assessment strategies of the course and marking guidelines. Particular emphasis is laid on the provision of constructive feedback via assignments. What the associate faculty have found particularly useful is the sharing of specific examples of good practice whether it be in terms of providing useful teaching comments or the formulation of effective questions or the summarizing and weaving of conference postings.

Course developers also receive appropriate training. Many of the courses provide multimedia electronic learning materials and while recognizing that these can help achieve best learning effects, designing such

materials represents a challenge. Training is provided on the development of learning outcomes and on how curriculum topics should be linked to the intended learning outcomes.  Hand in hand with this is the development of appropriate teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks which are designed to help and encourage students to achieve the stated intended learning outcomes.  In short, the mandatory courses focus on essential skills that would enhance the associates' ability to fulfill the roles and responsibilities required of them.

The Schools and the Teaching and Learning Centre provide general advice and guidance by sharing experience and good pedagogical practice while a designated monitor provides formal written feedback on the quality of assignment marking and expert advice on teaching methods and techniques. An on-line handbook provides a reliable and very accessible source of information as well as reference to further develop one's expertise within the teaching-learning environment of UniSIM. Specific meetings, workshops, dialogue sessions and customised intervention sessions also allow for a sharing of good practice to enhance teaching effectiveness.

## 5. Conclusion

While the use of technology is increasing in higher education institutions worldwide, flexible learning institutions, more than any other, have long been preoccupied with the exploration and expansion of media and technology to strengthen teaching / learning experience. Hartman (2008) notes: "In their simplest form, successful systemic approaches [to teaching and learning with technology] are characterized by institutional facilitation, administrative direction, and faculty interest. Institutional facilitation is perhaps the most critical of these because without it, administrative intent cannot be achieved and faculty engagement cannot be sustained." UniSIM with its flexible learning system depends heavily on part-time teaching staff; hence it is imperative for the university to have a strong commitment to staff development and to provide appropriate institutional facilitation.

The use of technology for teaching, according to Bates (2004) "raises the bar in terms of the knowledge required to teach effectively".  The structured support systems provided at SIM University are intended to enable the teaching faculty to enjoy a greater range of professional development options to equip themselves with new models and best practices so as to enhance the teaching-learning experience for all. Although there is no neat prescriptive model, SIM University continues to respond to faculty needs and to adopt practical approaches for improving the quality of provision for adults. Faculty development focusing on the creative use of ICT for teaching and learning is not about quick fixes; it is about addressing issues at the most fundamental level. Looking ahead, the university and the workplace environment will increasingly become richer both intellectually and culturally and in the use of technology. Accordingly there is a need to establish new, more creative faculty development/support mechanisms to meet the demands of a fast-changing world.

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