The implications of international collaborative partnerships and within higher education institutions

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen the encouragement of international collaborative partnerships in various guises. The aim of the paper is to consider the practical implications of international collaborative partnerships between and within higher education institutions (HEIs) in terms of the development of an international programme in Special Needs Education as well as its implementation. We argue that contextualising these demands within wider international and European demands creates unforeseen challenges for the participants both institutionally and individually. Attention is also paid to how fundamental tensions around internationalisation of the curriculum and knowledge-sharing and the extent to which this is being managed at the Consortium.

Keywords: higher education institutions, international collaborative partnerships, internationalisation.

1. Introduction

The, those professionally involved in education, including teachers in schools and higher education lecturers as aim of this paper is to consider the practical implications of international collaborative partnerships between and within higher education institutions (HEI) in terms of policy and practice. This case study concentrates on the Erasmus Mundus Masters Programme an EU initiative described as ‘the Community Action Programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of inter-cultural understanding through co-operation with third countries’ (Call for Proposals (EAC/22/04). The decision establishing this programme was adopted by the European Parliament and council on 5 December 2003 (Decision No 2317/2003/EC). This call for proposals highlighted the scale and potential for tensions to occur. Reference is made to a broad range of participants including the individual institutions of HEI, quality assurance agencies, the European Community and third countries (those outside the EU). Bid was a joint application from three universities (Roehampton University London, UK, Charles University Prague, the Czech Republic and Fontys University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands). The targeted participants for the Erasmus Mundus Masters Programme on Special Educational Needs (EM SEN) programme were graduates as well as those involved in the broad range of issues relating to disability both in theory and practice. The scale of diversity and professional involvement amongst the students is a key strength of
the Programme as it includes participants from such a wide range of educational contexts at all educational levels both within Europe and internationally. From the academic year 2005 – 2006 when the first cohort of 26 students from 19 different countries such as India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Botswana, Uganda, China, Vietnam and Canada, participated in the joint award programme EM SEN, the international dimension has continued to expand. By the time cohort 5 have completed the programme in summer 2010, a total of 128 students, 16 scholars from 49 different countries have been involved in the Programme. The potential for impact and development is incredible.

2. Context of the Programme and Student Perceptions

There has been a paradigm shift in thinking about disability over the past 20 or thirty years. Recent policy changes in Europe have been influenced both by new ways of thinking about disability and by people with disabilities. We have moved towards thinking about oppression that people with disabilities experience in society towards a social model of disability. These new ways of thinking are closely linked to the political activism of people with disabilities and their organisations who have had opportunities to have “their say”. The social model of disability focuses on the environmental conditions which disabled people find themselves and how society at large responds to disability as a human difference. The EM SEN study programme also reflects recent changes in policy and practice in field of special educational needs in Europe and internationally. Ainscow (1995) reminds that growing recognition that a special needs agenda should be seen as an essential element in the drive towards effective education for all. Movement towards inclusive education, social cohesion, compacting discrimination and valuing reflective practice are formulated in the study programme objectives or its learning intentions. These can be summarized as following: to promote a clear understanding of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and inclusive practice across Europe and Internationally at the level of its identification and definition, to encourage an exploration of relevant legislation and the range of policies affecting SEN, leading to a measured consideration of the nature of provision for SEN within international contexts of education practices, to enhance the knowledge of those professionally involved in SEN practice in Europe and internationally, to develop the ability of those professionals to analyse policy and practice within a range of contexts,

In practice, the EM SEN study programme was to encourage the students to understand an educational reality in a broader context and to question the notion of “normative” is seen as a desirable goal and a measure of achievement. A number of authors have argued that the terms employed implicitly determine responses towards those labelled. It is thus important for postgraduate students to focus not only on individual problems and needs but also to be aware that there are many disabling environments and attitudes in society which need to be adjusted. Therefore, the EM SEN study programme was built on the presumption that interest has to be given also to analysing social stratification, structural and environmental demands. The module aims to guide students in conducting reflective and critical study within a framework of their own social reality. As we argue elsewhere the students are led to build critical studies focused on observing broader environmental demands rather than those which are purely person-centred (Šiška, Habib, 2012, pg. 3). It is impossible to understand “disability policy” without first understanding what and who is meant by “disabled”. Similarly Sleee (2001) suggests asking a direct question: „how do we know disability?” And, as this author goes on to explain, “The answer to this question for most of us is – at a distance” (p. 171). It is therefore a challenge for tutors to mediate students’ reflection of their understanding and “knowing” of disability not primarily as a terms of diagnoses but also to raise students’ awareness of obstacles which persons with disabilities experience in their lives. Macfarlane (1996) provides further support with this statement: “Much of the service delivery experienced by disabled people has been dreamed up in offices by non-disabled persons who have no understanding of what is required and certainly had not any direct experience of requiring or receiving personal assistance” (pg. 10).

The notion of disability has been changing to focus on social and environmental factors rather than on individual fault. Growing understanding about disability leads to a higher acceptance of disability; that it is not a personal tragedy but rather a flawed social response. Disability thinking has shifted from the medical model to the social model. The paradigm of the social model of disability is not only evolving in its way of thinking but also in the activities of the disability movement from charity to rights (Šiška, Habib, 2012, pg. 3). The EM SEN study
programme reflects the changes that have been going on in social policies related to disability including educational policies in the last decades. Social policy for people with disabilities has always confronted the most fundamental of political questions: the qualifications for citizenship, and the extent to which the stigmatised groups of society can be considered worthy for education and determining their way of life (Šiška et al.).

Methods applied in the EM SEN programme therefore involve face-to-face, in depth interviewing techniques, giving the respondents the opportunity to “have their say” and reveal themselves and their ideas and opinions. Furthermore there is an internationally accepted request to acknowledge the importance of shifting approaches to identifying disability away from “diagnoses” towards the careful assessment of the interaction between the student and the school environment (Fergusson, 2008, p. 113). The students have opportunities to observe and analyze interactions of the learner with disability and the wider environment taking account history and social-cultural tradition. As a result the students are invited to evaluate the impact at varying levels of experience. Here are a few of their comments:

“Although I have done valuable work to empower NGOs and communities to take development issues into their own hands I have not emphasized awareness and capacity to take development issues into their own hands, I have not emphasized awareness and capacity building on the systemic obstacles that excluded the marginalized. I haven’t worked much on raising awareness on the various rights……” (Ethiopian student)

“… a person or when a child is born with disability, community members can be quick to identify some wrong previously committed by parents or others, in an effort to explain the appearance of disability. Such beliefs can lead to blame being cast against parents or others, ill feeling developing within and among communities, and embarrassment on the part of the parents…” (student from Papua New Guinea)

“…prior to 1950, educational opportunities were not accessible to the general public and disability was seen as punishment of God…” (Nepali student)

“… It is common knowledge in the Ghanaian society that surviving children with disabilities are commonly regarded as liabilities and burden to their families. Common views among those neighbours outside the family of the child with disability relate the predicament to the God’s “punishment” on the parent. The result is that many families of children with disabilities try to restrict the movement of their disabled children, so as to reduce stigma attached to the whole family by their neighbours…” (Ghanaian student)

“It brought home the importance of our own cultural values, at the same time taught us to respect and may be even adopt some of the cultural values of the countries where we lived and those of our fellow students”. (Indian student)

“To appreciate and respect each others ideas and views while working in groups”. (Chinese student)

“I have managed to influence the Ministry to develop an Inclusive Educational Policy instead of a Special Educational Policy”. (Bhutanese student)

“Before this programme, most of my knowledge about SEN was gathered from books and research papers, now I am working with several disabled organizations and these experiences have a lot of influences on my teaching and research practices”. (student from Uganda)

“I have become more involved in researching on inclusive education issues, promoting inclusive education in Bangladesh by talking to policy planners and education administrators and producing writings on disability issues”. (Bangladeshi student)

“It gave us an opportunity to liaise with professionals from different countries so that we could adopt the best practices and implement it in our own country”. (Pakistani student)

“I was promoted from Inspector to Senior Inspector Special Education. I was also requested by UNESCO to conduct a study titled, “A review of education policies, programmes and legislations with regard to inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, children and youth with special needs in Swaziland.” This study was well received by UNESCO therefore; it has enabled me to share information with other professionals in the field of education”. (Student from Swaziland)

The quotations from the students’ assignments indicate that students gain in the module opportunities to carefully analyze and critically reflect on complex interactions between their environment and individuals with disability. The key question is then about creating an environment which guaranties access to education and where human diversity
is welcomed. The debate is not only over innovations, reinventing, reforming and restructuring current schools but about setting up new educational systems and strategies based on principal - education as a matter of fundamental human rights.

In conclusion, this study programme EM SEN is an intensive course utilising a broad range of learning resources within three international contexts. Besides conventional academic studying the students are encouraged by tutors to become reflective and critical practitioners in the area of special education needs. Thus critical reflection conducted individually and within tutor groups is highly appreciated and valued. The results of the programme have begun to demonstrate that the vision of the EU in encouraging the development of the joint award EM SEN have begun to be realised.

As joint coordinators of this joint Masters award we have experienced the challenges for management and change caused by such an initiative. Looking back, this programme has a dynamic of its own that has been life transforming for the student and academic staff participants not only at a personal level but also at a professional level. The impact personally, institutionally demonstrates that change and transition may make demands that appear heavy, but simultaneously encourage further changes within the partner institutions.

References