

TANZ: Collaboration across the sector

In principle, institutions have a lot to gain by collaborating with one another in the development and delivery of e-learning programmes. However, the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (TANZ) is one of only a small number of instances of such collaboration in the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

THE TANZ INITIATIVE began in 1998, as a means of developing best practice within a group of polytechnics committed to growing and developing the polytechnic market through collaboration, cost-sharing and innovation. A memorandum of understanding was agreed by the four founding institutions in 2000. This commits the members to communicating and collaborating openly with one another in their efforts to develop programmes and infrastructure for vocational education. A small national office was established attached to Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), and work commenced on an initial set of projects.

Membership changed somewhat over the first few years and as at February 2008, it comprised Northland Institute of Technology (NorthTec), Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT), Universal College of Learning (UCOL), Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT), CPIT and Otago Polytechnic. Base costs are met through an annual subscription by member institutions while individual projects tend to be hosted and largely resourced by member institutions, either individually or jointly drawing on the resources and efforts of the national office where appropriate. Chief Executives meet on a monthly basis to govern the work of the accord. A TANZ Management Group, comprising senior representatives of each member institution, also meets monthly to drive the work programme. Various functional groups and working parties meet, as required, to progress their particular issues.

Collaborative projects have covered a wide range of activities. These include development contracts for the Jasper student enrolment and information system, cabling and telecommunications systems, sharing of information on innovative projects undertaken by member institutions, sharing of policies and systems, and using the accord to forge closer links with business and industry. However, a continuing and important stream of work concerns e-learning and the development and application of ICTs for teaching and learning.

An early project was the development of the National Certificate in First Line Management (online). This programme was targeted initially at 40 meat inspectors scattered around New Zealand. They wanted a qualification that built on their practical management skills and would assist them to develop and apply these skills across a broader range of applications. While CPIT hosted the programme, staff at the national TANZ Office contributed to the development and roll-out of the new programme. Later, other member institutions were able to take up the programme as well. The TANZ/CPIT team was able to use a rapid prototype approach to course development, employing just four team members and taking only

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a couple of months to complete the pilot programme. Making use of an action research approach and intensive research on learner experience, the team was able to refine the prototype extensively from that first offering. This approach has proved successful in subsequent online programmes as well.

This first online programme set a pattern that TANZ was to follow in subsequent years. It has been particularly successful in identifying as yet unmet demands for on-the-job vocational education and then developing an online or blended learning programme for these markets. Typically, TANZ members have employed TANZ developers and subject experts from host institutions to develop the online courseware and then recruited part-time and often physically dispersed tutors to deliver and assess the courses.

This model has avoided imposing further work on regular teaching staff, maintained a separation of course development from course delivery, and ensured a cost-effective programme. Other online or blended learning programmes that TANZ has developed include the National Certificate of Public Sector Services, the National Diploma in Business, the Graduate Certificate in Applied e-Learning, programmes in project management and postgraduate nursing and collaboration with several industry training organisations in the development of industry training packages.

Alongside these programme developments, TANZ has been working with IT contractors to develop a Moodle network to allow the distribution of e-learning courses and programmes across multiple providers. This project is also aiming to ensure consistency of quality and version control across all iterations of a programme, and a reduction in the burden of maintaining and updating courseware and systems through improved networking. It also develops communities of practice among collaborating institutions to support a focus on workplace learning.

Not surprisingly, from time to time TANZ has been confronted with voices from member institutions claiming that “we could do that just as well as TANZ.” On the whole, however, TANZ has been able to prove that it brings together a combination of attributes that none of the individual member institutions could claim to have. These include its speed of development, its concentration of expertise, its ability to focus intensively on project work, and its cost-effectiveness.

Reflections

The continuing interest and involvement of institutional chief executives in the governance of TANZ has been critical to its success. Their involvement ensures that TANZ continues to work in the interest of all members and that national officers have a strong mandate for their work.

TANZ has been careful to identify projects that are seen to be mutually beneficial to members or at least not competing with member interests. This is particularly the case with respect to the focus on online work-based training in areas not previously addressed by member institutions.

Membership of the consortium is carefully managed by the current institutional membership. To date, membership has been limited to the medium-to-large regional polytechnics and not extended to any of the smaller, financially challenged institutions. This has enabled TANZ to maintain its focus on addressing the needs of vocational training and education, rather than being diverted by the wider issues of government policy and funding for institutes of technology and polytechnics.

The TANZ structure has enabled the head office to recruit and retain a number of highly competent online system and courseware developers and focus them on these tasks. This would have been difficult for any individual member institution.