Russell Group University and an Engineering & Design Company

This project is still being set up at the time of writing the case study.

Background and Beginnings

An international engineering and design company had in-house training for taking its junior management staff to middle management level. They set up a partnership with a 'Russell Group' (a high profile research-intensive) university to convert this in-house training to an accredited three-year part-time MSc. The course was a hybrid of a company-specific MBA with Engineering.

Scope of this Case Study

A project like this will need to address a wide range of issues, such as assessment, feedback and reporting to the company, working to difficult and complicated deadlines and how the curriculum is decided on in discussion between the academics and the company managers, but also those people presenting the teaching for the company. This case study focuses on one particular element which encompasses the critical elements of working with the employer, achieving a dialogue, arriving at a point of agreement and bringing innovation to the company and the university.

The company intended to teach materials specific to their own working and projects and also to have the students develop their actual practice. This meant that they wanted their own staff to teach.

Teaching Staff and Students

Because the company wanted to have its own staff provide teaching, there was a potential issue with the university being able to guarantee the quality of the teaching of the award it was offering. The company staff presenting the teaching were the same staff who had been responsible before the partnership was set up. The company also wanted to consider accepting students not in their company onto the MSc in the long run, which raised the stakes for the company as well, since they would then be taking responsibility for students who were not their employees.

The particular problem here then was the partnership involved specific areas of engineering with a strong applied aspect, combined with the fact that the emphasis was not just on the engineering but also the project management. Universities had one type of expertise that was not enough for them to provide this bespoke programme but they also had the accreditation process and the experience of teaching and assessment.

Focus on the Teaching Quality in the Partnership

The solution was to turn to a third party within the university: the Educational Development

centre. They were asked to design a training for the Company's senior staff to prepare them, in the year before the MSc launched, to be able to teach to the same standard or higher than junior lecturers and other university teachers. This permitted the university to allow the Company staff to teach on one of their awards without undermining their usual guarantees of quality. It was decided that this training would be run as non-accredited short courses (not a degree) though the possibility of having it accredited might be introduced at a later stage. There are two options that might be explored:

1. Make this educational development into a university-accredited Postgraduate Certificate.
2. Accredit the short courses with the UK Higher Eduction Academy, a central body which aspires to being a national qualification.

Either or both of these can be pursued later but did not happen in the first run of the educational development.

At the planning stage, a list was made of what the Company wanted its staff to be able to learn to:

1. Collaborate in the assessment process.
2. Understand what it means to teach at Masters' level.
3. Design a curriculum that would culminate in a major project during the third year, where the students could be trusted to run important, real-life, projects.
4. Have the short courses paced such that they could fit around the eclectic working patterns of the students.

The Educational Developers were accustomed to these kinds of issues so this case study will focus on some of the background aspects that would prove to be important.

Initial non-teaching Issues

1. It had to be decided within the university whether the Educational Development centre would treat this as a consultancy or part of their normal support for Engineering departments. Consultancy would have attracted large fees for the centre, but would have complicated the arrangements between the Company and the Engineers.
2. A decision had to be taken as to whether the Company or the University would provide facilities. If the Educational Developers went to the Company, it was less disruptive to the students who did not therefore have to travel there but students seemed to prefer the idea of being taught within the university and thought that it would mean the study was taken more seriously.
3. The university ran all its courses through Moodle, a Virtual Learning Environment, because of the flexibility it offered but the Company teaching staff wanted face-to-face sessions.
4. When the teaching was done within the Company, all those who taught could rotate so that they were never all teaching at the same time. If they attended university courses for educational development, they had to all be available at the same time for substantial periods (entire days or more). The alternative was that they all frequently attend shorter sessions which was equally disruptive.

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Coming to Agreements and Action

The teaching of the company engineers was organised in a few weeks, because the initial effort had gone into setting up the MSc which they will teach on: it was only when that was organised that the educational development group was asked. In order to be able to offer something quickly, a senior member of staff took main responsibility for co-ordinating with the company and the design of the course. She was then able to co-ordinate with the company rapidly without needing to consult others and, with her broad experience of teaching teachers, could organise and start her teaching quickly. As the course got underway, she could then bring in colleagues to support her delivery of the teaching. This required that she was able to focus quite intensely on preparation and getting the teaching started so some re-organisation of her workload was needed. Because of her long history of working with different professionals, she was able to present them with material and ideas that made immediate sense to them as engineers rather than being abstract or general ideas about educating professionals at postgraduate level.

Initial Feedback

After the course had begun, very positive feedback came in straightaway: one senior engineer at the company said “I didn’t know there was so much to education!"

For consideration

How can the university be sure that the standard of teaching offered by non-university employees be of a suitable standard for their degree?

Who is going to be responsible for co-ordinating the different elements of a curriculum developed in partnership?

How might communication be organised so that everyone gets what they want and so that everyone gets better at communicating with one another even after the programme has started?

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