

Collaboration in strategic subjects: the lesson of Modern Languages

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Acknowledgements

The original proposal for the Collaboration Programme in Modern Languages in Higher Education was drawn up by a Steering Group consisting of Hilary Footitt, then Chair of the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), Michael Kelly and Richard Towell, both former Chairs of UCML, and David Robey, then chair of the Society for Italian Studies. The same Steering Group oversaw the management of the programme, with the addition of Liz Ashurst, Manager of the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) and the principal manager of the Programme, and Alison Dickens, Academic Coordinator for Linguistics and Area Studies in LLAS. John Selby of HEFCE, Paul Martin, then of the HEFCE National Coordination Team, and Alison Piper, the Programme evaluator, also attended its meetings. The Steering Group offers its warm thanks to a number of key individuals who made the Programme possible and helped ensure its success, particularly John Selby, Liz Ashurst, Paul Martin and Alison Piper. Sheila Watt, then of HEFCE, provided valuable help at the bidding stage. Equally warm thanks go to the leaders of the ten constituent projects and all those who participated in them; at a time when the demands and pressures on Modern Languages and Linguistics have been greater than ever, we are deeply impressed by the willingness, intelligence and energy with which they have contributed to the Programme.

David Robey

Steering Group Convenor



Foreword

Liz Beaty, Director (Learning and Teaching), Higher Education Funding Council for England

In December 1999, Brian Fender, HEFCE's then Chief Executive, wrote to the heads of all higher education institutions (HEIs) offering modern foreign languages (MFL). In the letter, he outlined our analysis of declining recruitment trends for these subjects and offered support to institutions from the Restructuring and Collaboration Fund. We were worried that, in the face of declining recruitment, HEIs would close departments and believed that, if they took account of what others were doing and worked together, the pace of closures might be slowed. We were worried then about neighbouring departments closing which would lead to the loss of provision in particular areas.

In the event, we received no proposal from institutions but, instead, a rather unusual and creative proposal from the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML). We had expected local arrangements for collaboration between neighbouring institutions to secure provision; instead, the UCML proposal involved all the major Modern Languages subject groups and some smaller ones, collaborating in 10 projects involving 24 HEIs and 39 departments over the period from 2001 to 2004.

I think it is fair to say that we were quite nervous about this – it was a complex, elaborate and innovative programme and the amount of money involved was really quite small (£482,500) and spread thinly. We recognised also that the normal competitive pressures between departments and HEIs would be exacerbated by the recruitment difficulties affecting the MFL subject

areas. A great deal could have gone wrong with the programme at the best of times and under the most propitious circumstances; the programme enjoyed neither of these. In the event, not only were our fears not realised, the programme has succeeded and achieved much more than we could have hoped.

This report outlines the main lessons learned from the programme. We hope these will inform others as they develop collaborative activity. As the report makes clear, though we hoped primarily to learn lessons for the modern languages communities, we have learned wider lessons, which we will bear in mind as we consider the development of other collaboration and the way in which we can sustain strategic subjects as we have been requested to do by the government. We hope that this report is widely read and that its lessons are noted by others in higher education.

We have learned some other lessons too: successful management of a programme of this type depends on strong leadership, good management, good support to the practitioners, sound monitoring and evaluation which are built into the programme from the beginning, and the enthusiastic participation of the project teams. We are grateful to the steering group, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, the TQEF National Co-Ordination Team, the evaluator, the project directors and all the participants in the 10 projects for the work they have put in to make this such a successful programme.

The Collaboration Programme in Modern Languages in Higher Education

Background

In October 2001, the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies were awarded funding of £482,950 from HEFCE's Restructuring and Collaboration Fund for a major and unique Collaboration Programme in Modern Languages, to run for three years from October 2001.

The Programme comprised ten projects, which, between them, covered Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Linguistics. A total of 24 different English institutions were involved.

The projects were intended to provide a vital series of supports for the departments and subjects involved, and in some cases much-needed strengthening of less widely taught languages. They also aimed to serve as pilots and examples to test, illustrate and promote the different possibilities of inter-institutional collaboration and cooperation.


Through the projects, the programme delivered resources, programmes and activities to support

- Undergraduate honours degrees
- Postgraduate taught courses
- Research resource production
- Research training

Management of the Programme

The Steering Group (see Acknowledgements above) met twice a year. Projects were asked to write a quarterly report on their activities and an annual report which required project teams to reflect on the experiences of collaboration. Meetings of project leaders were held twice a year to enable them to share experiences and engage in joint problem solving.

Although the projects were not required to commission a formal evaluation of their work, the Steering Group for the Programme appointed an external evaluator at the start of the programme who evaluated the programme against its stated aims and objectives.



Even in a tough and competitive world, the participants in the Modern Languages Programme have shown that small co-operative partnerships can be both highly academically productive and personally rewarding.

- Alison Piper, final evaluation of the Programme

Projects

Undergraduate honours degrees

Teaching Collaboration in a Virtual Department of Dutch
(University College London)

- an IT-supported framework for inter-institutional collaborative teaching across the Dutch undergraduate curriculum.

Gruppo 62: undergraduate collaboration in teaching Italian culture
(University of Hull)

- web-based learning and teaching resources for the teaching of the history and culture of Medieval and Renaissance Italy and Italian language and linguistic variety in the Universities of Hull and Leeds.

University Teaching Database in French Studies
(University of Reading)

- a database giving details of courses offered by staff and research students for exchange.

Web materials in European Area Studies
(Liverpool John Moores University)

- web-based learning materials including audio and video interviews and digitised images of contemporary Europe.

Research resource production

Database of current research in Modern Languages in the UK
(Oxford Brookes University)

- a live, interactive, comprehensive, online facility produced by Oxford Brookes and CILT. It will provide a single point of reference for information about research in progress in modern language studies across the UK.

Postgraduate taught courses

MA in Italian Studies: Culture and Communication
(University of Birmingham)

- an MA taught by staff from the Italian Departments at the Universities of Warwick and Birmingham.

MA in Soviet and Post-Soviet studies
(University of Surrey)

- an MA taught and administered jointly with the University of Bath, including the delivery of modules using virtual learning environments.

Research training

North West Centre for Research Training in Languages and Linguistics
(University of Salford)

- a Centre offering a suite of research training courses in the crucial interface between modern languages and linguistics (theoretical and applied) and a web-site with information for postgraduate students.

Materials for postgraduate research training in Romance Studies
(University of London Institute of Romance Studies)

- a substantial corpus of on-line materials for post graduate research training in the Romance languages.

Research training collaboration in French
(University of Reading)

- a programme of study days giving students in a consortium of universities the opportunity to exchange ideas and practice by presenting their work in an informal and supportive context.

An evaluation of the Collaboration Programme

The following is a summary of the final evaluation report of the Collaboration Programme, commissioned by the Programme's Steering Group and carried out by Dr Alison Piper, appointed external evaluator in 2001. Its purpose was to assess how far the Programme achieved its four strategic aims and to report on overall lessons that have been learned about collaboration—in higher education in general and in Modern Languages in particular. Project annual and final reports plus 18 interviews with project participants and associates were used as evidence.

Strategic aims of the Programme

Strategic aim 1: to promote and test ten different examples of inter-institutional collaboration and cooperation

The Programme successfully promoted and tested ten different examples of inter-institutional collaboration and co-operation, which could be applied across other subject areas. These were small-scale co-operative collaborations between individual academic staff in mostly research-led pre-1992, HEIs; the number of institutions involved in each case ranged from two to six; nine projects were in Modern Languages, one in Linguistics. Their intended outputs variously took the form of new degrees or courses, new approaches to teaching, learning and research training, and new online research or learning resources; some were at undergraduate and some at postgraduate level. Eight projects have been implemented, but one set of multimedia learning resources is not yet available online and the research database is still to be fully populated.

The relatively modest funding of the Programme has leveraged valuable achievements in terms of the lessons, which have been learned about collaboration. These are relevant to other HE subject areas as well as Modern Languages

Strategic aim 2: to contribute to the maintenance and development of specialist provision of Modern Languages programmes in HEIs in England

The Programme has contributed to the maintenance and development of specialist provision of Modern Languages programmes in HEIs in England in individual language and linguistics departments in primarily pre-1992 research-led institutions. Regional collaborations produced the most robust collaborative programmes, while the Virtual Department of Dutch project showed

what can be done at national level to create critical mass for a very small subject area.

Given the uncertainties about sustaining the 10 projects beyond the short term and the crisis facing Modern Languages, the more intangible outcomes of collaboration may be longer lasting in their effect on maintaining and developing provision, particularly in terms of enhancing strategic understanding, staff morale and the student experience.

The fact remains that since the start of the Programme in 2001 the position of Modern Languages has deteriorated further and the external policy context is even less propitious. However, while the Programme has not improved the strategic position of Modern Languages, its outputs have provided significant CPD for staff and increased their confidence, strengthened disciplinary communities and enriched students' learning. These are important achievements in the light of the low funding base of the Programme and the languages crisis, and they demonstrate the capacity of this academic community to work together.

Strategic aim 3: to embed successful project outcomes and processes of collaboration as long-term institutional activities and/or resources after the end of the funding period

How far successful project outcomes and processes of collaboration have been embedded as long-term institutional activities and/or resources after the end of the funding period varies across the Programme. Those projects most likely to continue at least in the short term, probably half, are not necessarily those most successful in achieving their goals but those, which now align with broader institutional and national strategies and consequently have a chance of securing funding and/or institutional support. Unless this funding and support is continued, the task of embedding both courses and resources is likely to be unsustainable beyond the short term, especially when student numbers are small. Embedding is more doubtful for collaborative resources whose concept and design turned out to not to be entirely appropriate to the issue they were designed to address.

Strategic aim 4: to help to develop a culture and understanding of inter-institutional collaboration in modern languages

Successful project outputs and the lessons learned have enabled the Programme to help to develop a culture and understanding of inter-institutional collaboration in

Modern Languages. This has taken place primarily within each project's own language community and within Linguistics rather than across the whole Modern Languages field. However, the new synergies and enriched professional understandings which have emerged from the projects have contributed to a culture of collaboration beyond their immediate boundaries, demonstrated in new initiatives in both Languages and other disciplines. The fact that nearly all project leaders were senior staff means that Programme has equipped them to offer leadership in collaboration as a strategy for the survival of Modern Languages in higher education.

Collaboration: lessons learned

Benefits and costs of collaboration

The benefits of collaboration—what happened which would not have happened otherwise—were in the form of new shared courses and enhanced resources for small academic groups and disciplines; enrichment for students; significant personal satisfaction, morale-building and CPD for staff; strengthening Modern Languages and inter-institutional networks between linguists; providing models of collaborative work for other discipline areas and for the future. Since the Programme was funded at marginal cost, the main costs of collaboration over and above the HEFCE funding were unbudgeted institutional overheads and staff time. The cost of the latter was particularly substantial.

Factors which helped and hindered collaboration

Factors which helped collaboration were: sound and strategic conceptualisation of a project and the amenability of its goals to collaborative achievement; institutional support, particularly at senior level (although this was rarely noted); good institutional administrative and technical back-up; feel-good factors such as motivation, enjoyment, mutual encouragement, intellectual rewards; positive attitudes such as energy, good team work, interpersonal skills, valuing others; willingness to experiment, to negotiate, to abandon territorial attitudes, to cut through barriers; strong leadership, effective management and communication; HEFCE funding and other finance where it was sought and available. The funding factor was critical: it is doubtful that any of the projects would have happened without it.

Factors which hindered were: flaws in a project's concept and design; failure to anticipate the true costs and administrative demands of the collaboration; strategic,

procedural and cultural incompatibilities and conflicts between institutions and, occasionally, partners; staff deployment; intensive administration; long management supply chains; poor communication; problems with the design, execution or up-loading of online resources.

Lessons about successful collaborations

The Programme has enlarged knowledge and understanding of different types of co-operative collaborations between departments in higher education institutions and has created positive outcomes. For Modern Languages the evidence of this small sample of projects suggests that

- collaborations which involve face-to-face teaching, collaborative learning and research training are particularly productive at postgraduate level, and enhance the students' experience.
- at undergraduate level, collaborations may be more viable and more valuable for students if they focus on the production of learning resources and collaborative staff activity, with a minimum of joint teaching and assessment or none at all.
- collaborations which purposefully bring together staff and students working in minority and lesser-taught languages can create critical mass and may significantly strengthen those discipline areas.

For all disciplines, the Programme has produced operational lessons in terms of the general conditions for successful collaboration, its necessary processes and positive outcomes and also its negative conditions.

Conclusions

Collaboration interacts with other factors—competition, identity, research paradigms in the humanities, regional, global and cross-sectoral partnerships, and current agendas in higher education. It needs to be planned, managed and evaluated within this broader strategic context.

The Programme has shown that small co-operative partnerships can be both highly academically productive and personally rewarding, and should inspire Modern Languages to search for more 'winning combinations'.

Guidelines for collaboration

~ a checklist for funders and project leaders

These are the main lessons that the Modern Languages Collaboration Programme can offer any similar venture in other institutions or other subjects.

Bidding

1. Leave plenty of time for bidders to draw up proposals and consult with relevant bodies in the host and partner institutions.
2. Don't underestimate the cost of projects.
3. All proposals should include
 - a business plan, endorsed by a senior manager in the institution (Deputy Vice-Chancellor/Pro Vice-Chancellor)
 - a detailed budget
 - a project timetable giving details of activity each quarter and expenditure per quarter. Quarterly targets act as a useful check for monitoring purposes
 - a risk analysis of the collaborative partnership.

Partners

4. Do not collaborate for the sake of it.
5. It is crucial to have the right partners in a collaborative project. Previous experience of working together is advised. Collaborations proposed 'top down' by funding bodies or steering groups are likely to be less fruitful and/or incur a high management overhead for the project director.
6. The tensions between collaboration and competition need to be recognised and negotiated. If the context is a highly competitive one, a collaboration is very unlikely to succeed.
7. The organisation of the consortium needs to be considered carefully at the time of drawing up the bid, in particular:
 - Who will be the link person from each institution? Are these people committed to the aims of the project?
 - Do the contributions of the project partners complement each other?
 - Does the collaboration enable the partners to maintain valuable features of their own identities?
8. The size and complexity of a collaboration must be kept in check. If all partners are to be closely involved in strategic decisions, the size of the consortium should probably be limited to four

partners or less.

9. Collaborative projects which require face-to-face staff or student contact are best organised locally or regionally.

Aims

10. Any bid for a collaborative project should be closely aligned with the strategic aims/mission of the departments and institutions involved, to ensure that it is adequately supported during the project term. Each partner should demonstrate the ways in which the proposed project fits into its own overall institutional strategy.
11. The following questions must be addressed:
 - Is there a genuine need for the work to be carried out by the project?
 - Are the aims achievable within the resources available to bid for?
 - Does the project require collaboration to meet its aims?

Institutional involvement

12. Consider carefully who in the institution needs to know about the project. The bid template will probably require the signature of a senior member of staff from participating institutions but other people should be involved early on, including:
 - Other colleagues in all the departments concerned
 - The QA departments of all participating institutions if a collaborative degree programme (undergraduate or postgraduate) is being devised.
 - Technical and clerical staff whose assistance may be needed during the project term.

Teams

13. Collaborations are more likely to work if they are led by senior staff with a stake in their success and the status to drive a project through.
14. Ideally, the project Director should have been involved in the writing of the project bid and should be committed to the aims of the project. Directing the project will undoubtedly be time-consuming, however. The project team should therefore consider whether the leadership of the project should be rotated
15. If the project aims to produce online resources or use VLEs, it is advisable to engage technical staff at

the bidding stage to ensure that achievable goals are set in this area.

16. It is important to consider whether staff are being deployed at a level which is most effective and most appropriate to their experience? There should also be a good blend of junior, senior, clerical and technical staff. It is strongly recommended that clerical/administrative support is built into the budget or a project officer is appointed to ease the management burden on the project director.
17. If the project involves the joint provision of a degree programme across two or more institutions, procedures need to be devised for the registration and administration of students across the two institutions.

Management

18. A vital ingredient for a successful collaborative project is effective communication across the consortium. If not well-managed, collaborative projects can leave all colleagues feeling alienated and put upon. The following questions should therefore be considered:
- How often will project teams meet? Remember that, as well as making decisions about the project and engaging in collective problem solving, meetings have other positive consequences.
 - How regular does communication need to be between meetings?
 - How will decisions be made between meetings?
 - How will the activities of project partners be monitored by the project director?
 - Will a project Steering Group be established? Who will be members of the Steering Group and how frequently will the group meet? What will its terms of reference be?
19. The composition of the Steering Group for a programme such as the Collaboration Programme in Modern Languages is important. This Programme had representation from HEFCE and both the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies and the HEFCE National Coordination Team, now part of the Higher Education Academy,

Monitoring

20. It is important to devise appropriate reporting procedures for projects, but it may be

counterproductive to produce over-detailed report templates. A simple proforma to check progress at quarterly intervals is helpful. Completed proformas should be reviewed by those managing the project and feedback given to the project teams.

21. The report template could be a series of questions requiring an answer of about a paragraph or a request for a reflective account covering a number of themes. The annual report would normally require an expenditure return and a budget.

Evaluation

22. The Modern Languages Programme appointed an evaluator for the whole Programme to assess whether the programme met its aims and objectives. The evaluator also provided useful formative feedback on the management of the programme as it progressed: the early involvement of the evaluator was extremely helpful. The individual projects were not required to appoint an evaluator but were asked to reflect on their activities at the end.

Support

23. It was useful to the Steering Group to have meetings of project leaders once or twice a year to discuss project management issues and share problems. The project leaders also found this helpful.
24. In this programme, essential support and advice for the projects, and for the Steering Committee, was provided by a member of the HEFCE National Coordination Team. It may be helpful to invite one of the Team to provide staff development workshops for project teams. The Coordination Team has produced a handbook for managers of FDTL projects, which contains useful guidelines on project management, financial arrangements and consortium agreements. It can be accessed on line at www.heacademy.ac.uk/documents/PMH_introduction.pdf

Sustainability

25. All bidders should be asked to state how the work of the project will be sustained after the funding period. Nevertheless it is not clear that all the Modern Languages projects will be sustainable without further dedicated resources.

Recommendations to the Higher Education Funding Council for England

The Steering Group makes the following recommendations to the funding council in the light of the experience of the Programme.

The purpose of collaboration

1. The main achievement of the Collaboration Programme has been to enhance students' learning experience and the morale of staff. It should be recognized that collaboration will not necessarily lead to savings.
2. Inter-institutional collaboration requires special resourcing, and is unlikely to happen without resource incentives. Given the financial constraints on HEIs, there is a continuing need for a HEFCE funding stream for this purpose.
3. Subject-level collaboration has a critical role to play in the development of teaching and learning activities and resources, and works particularly when the initiative comes from subject practitioners. E-learning development is a case in point. But HEIs are often unable to respond to initiatives of this kind; there is a need for a system of national-level provision.

Supporting strategic subjects

4. In parallel with the lifelong learning networks, HEFCE should fund further cooperative collaborations to support both minority and more widely taught languages.
5. Building on the DfES research, which has mapped regional provision of languages, HEFCE should fund a follow-up research project identifying needs and opportunities for regional collaboration in languages between HEIs.
6. The DfES should fund a number of cross sectoral collaborative projects to develop outreach activities in regional secondary schools, including: provision of language learning materials; development of Ambassador/Buddy schemes; motivational road shows; taster courses; open days. This would provide new models of collaboration and would help promote the uptake of languages both at Key Stage 4 and post 16 levels.

Promoting and facilitating effective collaboration

7. The Higher Education Academy should commission a number of funded projects, which would develop those areas of academic development, which would be enhanced by cooperation between institutions.
8. HEFCE should use the final report to be produced by the Collaboration Programme to provide a checklist for both funders of and bidders for collaborative projects.

Programme partners

UCML
University Council
of Modern Languages



LLAS
Languages
Linguistics
Area Studies

