



Preliminary Assessment and Commentary

For DE Hub Innovation in Distance Education
Project

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Purpose and Scope of DE Hub

The DE Hub Innovation in Distance Education Project is a unique initiative to develop and sustain a central repository and dissemination hub for distance learning research, best teaching practices for distance education, innovative uses and management of instructional technologies; models for building sustainable partnerships, delivering HE to underserved populations and leveraging economic development capacity among Australia's diverse rural communities. Moreover, the University of New England, Charles Sturt University, Central Queensland University, and the University of Southern Queensland presently serve 44% of all distance learning students in Australia. These students are primarily dispersed in rural geographical regions and face various challenges for accessing higher education that provide students with networking communities and social inclusion that is common, and often taken for granted, on university campuses.

At the outset of any major project initiative there is a tendency to focus primarily on specific tasks to meet the funder's requirements. In other words, the emphasis is on 'checking all the boxes' that the initiative has met the goals and objectives stated in the project brief and that these have met project timelines. *Although this is important, it is equally important to concurrently establish a vision of DE Hub and conceptualise what it will look like in 2012.*

The branding process is about how others view your university (DE Hub) not how you view your organisation. How will external stakeholders, potential researchers, practicing academicians, partner organisations and government agencies view DE Hub in 2012? What will they say about your initiative and why? Are the resources and services provided by DE Hub really what institutions need or are they just what institutions want or prefer? Perhaps this is a subtle distinction of semantics, however, in the end universities and their constituents will support and likely pay for what they need because the 'DE Hub services and resources' is considered a value-added proposition. It helps them do their work better, more efficiently, and with the necessary support to make their work easier. Conversely, if DE Hub is seen as replicating similar initiatives or as just another terminal grant project with a finite life, institutions will direct their energies, resources and efforts in other directions. *The key to DE Hub is to start with the end in mind and continually re-assess and adapt DE Hub activities to achieving this end.*

2012: An External View of DE Hub across Australia and Asia Pacific Region

- DE Hub is viewed as the primary and central repository for distance education research and dissemination for the Australian HE sector and the Asia-Pacific Region.
- DE Hub is viewed as a convener of priority research projects among faculty, students, university leaders, and oversight agencies in Australia.
- DE Hub electronic resources are seen as easy to access, easy to understand, and easy to implement.
- The DE Hub Bi-Annual International Conference is seen as the premier distance learning event in Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region attracting senior leaders, faculty, business representatives, and government officials.
- DE Hub is seen as an advocate for rural economic development and community building among rural community leaders, citizens and students.
- DE Hub's international linkages are viewed as creating opportunities for the Australian HE sector for research, technology transfer, and fostering student learning communities in distance education.
- DE Hub and the UNE campus are visited by HE leaders and researchers nationally, regionally and globally.
- DE Hub leadership and staff are viewed as creative speakers to share DE Hub practices and research at conferences across the region and the globe.
- DE Hub is viewed internally by UNE leadership, faculty, and staff as an essential element of UNE's mission and distance education service continuum.
- UNE faculty are consistently contributing research and best practices from their own work to the DE Hub repository for dissemination.
- The DE Hub four-university partnership is viewed as a model for other universities to replicate and adapt in their sectors.
- The DE Hub Annual Teaching and Rewards Programme is viewed as the most prestigious in Australia and showcases the unique work of DE Hub, Australian faculty and researchers, and its impact in the sector.
- DE Hub is viewed by the sector as an effective 'broker' of joint research initiatives and consultancy networks for Australian higher education.

DE Hub's Core Values

Organisational values are not synonymous with the activities and tasks that an organisation necessarily conducts to meet its mission. The core values are those attributes that drive the entire organisation's behaviour, are embraced by the staff, and seen by external stakeholders as the key elements to everything that DE Hub does.

Why is clarity and consistent communication about the core values important for DE Hub? First, these set the parameters for the work of DE Hub and provide a basis for

DE Hub to learn how to say no! *The primary challenge for DE Hub, like many new initiatives, is to avert the common strategic mistake of trying to be all things to all people.* This is exactly what the grant application suggests for the creation of DE Hub. DE Hub will serve everyone, dramatically improve rural economic development, foster new and diverse learning communities, be the centre of global distance education research, solve the attrition problem of distance learning (30% in Australia HE sector), attract all the leading distance learning experts in the world, foster international partnerships with every organisation from Microsoft to Coca Cola and Athabasca U. to the Open University. The modern university often calls this 'mission ambiguity' where its primary messages are confusing to the general public.

There are two options for DE Hub. First, the organisation can maintain a clear and well-defined focus that promotes excellence, service, and collaboration. Conversely, DE Hub can try to do too much, spread itself and its staff too thin, involve itself in too many UNE issues, compromise excellence and head down the road of mediocrity. The former is the optimum strategy.

What are the core values of DE Hub? In this consultant's view, the primary core values of DE Hub are:

- the creation, management and dissemination of high quality distance education research;
- to promote HE access for regional rural communities in Australia by improving the practice and delivery of distance education. (DE Hub's global impact cannot occur until it has built its reputation and resource base locally); and
- to foster inclusiveness of student rural HE communities, faculty research partnerships, and interinstitutional/organisational partnerships.

These three core values must be at the centre of all activities, services, and resources provided by DE Hub. The brand recognition elements listed previously for DE Hub 2012 incorporate all of these values and all centre around DE Hub's research, access, and inclusiveness values. One of the first tasks of the Reference Group could be to provide input into identification of these core values relative to the tasks outlined in the project brief. Lastly, a good mission statement should fit on the back of a business card. What is DE Hub's mission statement? This is not the activities, tasks, and related work of the project. It is a concise statement that incorporates the core values and tells the layperson exactly what DE Hub does. The 'how' is all the activities and tasks that allow DE Hub to meet its mission.

UNE and DE Hub

UNE is the lead institution in the DE Hub Project. As a result, and because of the visibility the project brings to the campus, there will be a natural inertia from central administration to have DE Hub concurrently solve and promote UNE interests. At one level, this is to be expected and the two cannot be rigidly separated. On the other hand, DE Hub partners and the Reference Group as well as the funding agency will focus on (and hold accountable) how this multi-institutional initiative serves the entire Australian HE sector. The following comments have been communicated to the Deputy Vice Chancellor and are provided here as a reference.

1. DE Hub should be allowed to develop autonomously without any direct influence or expectations from UNE. The evolution of DE Hub will inherently bring many benefits to UNE in the long-term (2-3 years). The DE Hub Director should refrain from using DE Hub to directly address current challenges and initiatives for UNE central administration. Serving two masters at the outset will create unanticipated and problematic issues.
2. There is one exception to #1. UNE faculty do not engage in distance education research at any significant level. This is a paradoxical element for an institutional that prides itself on being a leading distance education provider in Australia. From discussions with a cross-section of UNE faculty representatives, it is generally recognised that distance education research is seen as secondary and lower priority than discipline-based pure research. Moreover, there appears to be a view among many junior (perhaps senior faculty) that distance education research will not be given equitable weight by academic units in the promotion and tenure process. This is an academic policy and management issue that will need to be addressed by the Heads of Schools in the future. DE Hub's credibility with UNE at the helm will be influenced by the research contributions of UNE faculty to the DE Hub repository. This issue may need to be addressed among the partner institutions as well regarding the overall credibility and reputation of DE Hub's evolution.
3. The DE Hub Director would be astute to begin building a new paradigm for UNE faculty where distance education research through the DE Hub will provide faculty regional and global visibility for their work. Moreover, DE Hub can provide UNE faculty with opportunities for joint-research and possibly teaching with other faculty from the partner universities

and beyond. And, most importantly, use the DE Hub mantra of ease of access, ease of understanding, and ease of implementation to build this paradigm. DE Hub can help UNE faculty meet their teaching and research obligations more effectively, efficiently, and simply more easily.

DE Hub Resource Organisation and Management of Repository

The current literature and research base for distance education, open learning, open learning resources, communications technologies and related fields is massive and growing exponentially. DE Hub's three theme areas of distance education communities, distance education teaching and learning, and distance education research and evaluation could feasibly have unlimited subsections under these broadly-based categories. At the same time, you have to start somewhere and these three areas are excellent. The following are initial observations of key issues that need to be resolved to make access to the repository a seamless and easy process for users.

- What research resources will comprise the initial catalogue for each category? It would seem the natural place to start would be the Australian HE sector.
DE Hub and its partner networks would provide relatively easy access.
- How will DE Hub collect the initial research resources for the theme areas? Will a national call for contributions be sent to all universities and agencies across Australia? Will they be submitted in PDF files or Word or both? How will DE Hub index these resources and who will have responsibility among staff to manage these?
- Who will set the research agenda for topical-based research projects funded by DE Hub? How many of these will there be? How are they prioritised? The partner universities are being allocated AUD\$15,000.00 to conduct research for DE Hub. Do they identify the topics? The terms for the Reference Group suggest that this group will not have any input on what activities DE Hub conducts so the research priorities seem to be outside the scope of the Reference Group. Is it of value to ask the Reference Group members for ideas? These are key distance education practitioners who should be 'informally' tapped as a resource not just a voluntary advisory group for DE Hub.

- How will global distance education journals be engaged in the contribution process to DE Hub? Doctoral dissertations? Independent research agencies and government entities?

A key initial task will be to front-load the three theme areas with a sound catalogue of research. Again, reverting to DE Hub's core values and mission this is a critical task that immediately puts DE Hub on the map as a research repository. More importantly, this initial front-load provides an opportunity to 'pilot test' internal processes, dissemination venues, and to refine the basic systems of research resource gathering, indexing, access, and dissemination. When this is rolled out it should be announced as a piloting of

DE Hub's resource repository where users can provide feedback and suggestions. It is recommended that DE Hub take the necessary time for this process before scalability is accelerated.

DE Hub Staffing and Resource Management

DE Hub has a small and talented core staff. This suggests that staff assignments need to be carefully assessed and aligned with the key elements of running a research repository. Again, taking on peripheral issues and engaging in unrelated projects will fragment staff capacity and negatively impact maintaining an upbeat, 'can do' attitude among staff. More is not necessarily better than less and again trying to be all things to all people is just not a prudent strategy for DE Hub. This responsibility of managing expectations for DE Hub is a critical role for the Director. Start slow, phase in various aspects of the project and focus on quality, efficiency, and user services. The scope will expand by itself without committing a small organisation and its staff to unattainable goals that no organisation could accomplish.

The small staff also suggests another strategy that may serve DE Hub and the staff members well. Universities are infamous for compartmentalising staff in their unique roles and jobs. This often creates communication issues across staff assignments and frustration for staff. *Job shadowing*, while a bit time consuming at the outset, allows each staff member to learn various aspects of their co-workers. It also fosters a stronger team environment and promotes the sharing of information and resources among staff to meet organisational goals and objectives. Strict division of staff line authority in small organisations is counterproductive and inefficient. Even if DE Hub committed four hours per week to helping staff learn selected parts of their co-workers' jobs, this will reap benefits in the long-term development of DE Hub.

DE Hub Sustainability and Scalability

Sustainability

DE Hub has AUD\$3.6 million at the outset. Will there be reoccurring funding for DE Hub after three years? Possibly, but unlikely. Funding agencies will argue that if the project is a value added resource for the Australian HE sector it needs to stand on its own financially. This is not to suggest there will not be grant and gift opportunities for DE Hub to tap as it evolves but it is smart to begin planning from the outset how DE Hub can create revenue streams to provide stable base funding beyond three years.

Let's return to the fundamental mission and core values of DE Hub - - - high quality distance education research, expanding rural HE access, and building social inclusiveness among distance education learning communities and partnerships across the sector. *Will universities, businesses, government agencies and individuals be willing to pay for the continuum of services that DE Hub provides in 2012?* The probability is yes provided the range and the quality of services and resources meets their needs, not their wants. Let's look at some options for consideration.

- During the initial three years of the project, DE Hub will move from a project to a potentially larger organisational entity. Should DE Hub pursue an association model? No. The politics with other Australian professional associations and just the organisational management of such an entity would not be feasible.
- A potential alternative would be to transition it into the 'DE Hub Distance Education Research Cooperative.' Why not a consortium? Because DE Hub already has four universities partnering in its inception and a consortium tends to imply a finite number of members. The perceptions of the G8 across the Australian HE community suggests that this approach creates diverse perceptions, some not positive, that would be an unwise strategy for DE Hub.

Why a cooperative? First, there are no limits on the types and number of organisations that could affiliate with DE Hub. Members would come from Australia, the greater Asia-Pacific Region, and globally? Would you have members pay for individual resources? No. This is just problematic from a funding management standpoint. The best approach would be a membership fee in which Institution/Organisation X receives a range of resources and services available through the Cooperative. (See www.wiche.edu and review the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications for an example of a very successful distance education cooperative in the US). This could provide one source of revenue.

- A second source could be the Bi-Annual Conference. Building this into an international event has the potential to net AUD\$30,000-40,000 provided the leg-work for sponsors and contributing organisations is managed effectively. In the off-years, DE Hub could offer seminars or even an Australia-focused event for revenue generation.
- In 2012, has DE Hub developed to a point that it is a valued-added resource of UNE? If so, is not some level of reoccurring funding justified? What if all DE Hub staffing was funded by UNE after 2012? This is about positioning DE Hub over the next three years externally and internally.
- DE Hub consultancies and continuing education could also provide a valuable source of revenue in the future. DE Hub may have consultancy teams that could provide expertise to various HE units across the sector. The UNE Partnerships entity in Armidale already provides training and development for business and industry and generates its own funding. Are there opportunities for closer cooperation between DE Hub and this unit? Or could DE Hub start its own CE arm to offer technology and distance learning research training?

There are no definitive answers to these scenarios. However, these are all feasible options to consider as DE Hub develops. What is clear is that DE Hub will need to develop a sustainability plan that incorporates funding from multiple sources in the future.

Scalability

The scalable development of DE Hub will be dependent on meeting the project deadlines as well as on input from the partner universities and Reference Group. Within the constraints of meeting project deadlines, it is recommended that DE Hub not try to develop too quickly without clearly pilot testing its many venues of operation. The primary function of access to the research repository of DE Hub needs to be tested and refined. This phased in approach will facilitate up-scaling DE Hub.

Colloquium and Conference

The plans for the Colloquium and the Conference are excellent. Having managed a range of major national and international conferences, however, it is recommended that the ambitious goals for the international conference be revisited. DE Hub does not have international visibility and credibility. The inaugural conference needs to first have a regional focus (Australia and the Asia-Pacific) and second, a global one.

Secondly, the management team for an international event of the size suggested will find this to be labour intensive. There is an incredible amount of work that goes into

developing, managing, and implementing these types of events. Additional consulting advice on the conference is beyond the scope of this consultancy.

The Colloquium should be held in Canberra and the actual conference in Sydney. There may be political reasons for exposure in Canberra and having the Colloquium experts there would be sufficient. International audiences will want to come to Sydney or Melbourne first time around. This will be the first visit by many delegates to Australia and these cities will be major attractions. We don't hold a first time UK event in Portsmouth; we hold it in London. One should never underestimate the appeal of the venue location for an event. It will influence potential delegates as much as the programme.

The two events together should not exceed five days; preferably four or four and a half. The Colloquium could start on the afternoon on Day 1, go the entire next day, and then lead into the conference.

Lastly, if you are going to hold an international conference you need to have international representatives on your planning committee. This is common sense and a common courtesy.

Summary Considerations for DE Hub

- Develop clear mission statement in concert with core values.

- Develop a conceptual framework for DE Hub 2012. What will the organisation look like and how do you want it to be perceived by internal and external stakeholders?

- DE Hub needs to develop autonomously and without undue influence from UNE until the basic organisational structure and service continuum has evolved (2011).

- A matrix for the flow of research resources into the repository needs to be outlined. How will these be indexed and organised? Who will do it? How will resources be disseminated?

- DE Hub must advocate for UNE faculty to engage in distance education research. This is the most paradoxical element for an institution that prides itself as being a distance education organisation. UNE faculty must contribute research to DE Hub.

- Team building and job shadowing may be a viable strategy for consideration. It strengthens the organisation, provides back-ups to key job functions, and inherently builds your team.
- A sustainability model such as the “DE Hub Distance Education Research Cooperative’ needs to be discussed for the future beyond 2012.
- Colloquium in Canberra; conference in Sydney or Melbourne. Maximum of 5 days total, preferably 4 or 4.5 days. DE Hub needs to reconsider the scope of its first international conference.
- At some point, DE Hub’s role on the UNE campus needs to be discussed within the context of the current roles of the CTL. There is potential for an overlap of services.
- It’s an exciting project so have fun!

DE Hub Research Topics

The research agenda for DE Hub will be developed by the Director, the Reference Group, Colloquium presenters, the partner universities and other networks across Australia and globally. The following are presented only as some preliminary ideas.

- The role of social networking tools by universities for marketing, communications, and building social inclusion. Relative to DE Hub, the focus could be refined to include social networking tools for promoting social inclusion of student learning communities in rural areas.
- Organisational and dissemination models for Open Educational Resources (OERs) for rural student communities.
- Innovative uses of Web 2.0 and mobile technologies for serving geographically isolated students (rural communities).
- Theoretical and practical applications of communication and distance education technologies for promoting and advancing rural economic development.

- The effects of multi-tasking with multiple technologies by 18-22 year olds on effective teaching and learning.
- Identifying key attributes of distance teaching that contribute to improving faculty teaching in regular, face-to-face classrooms.
- Expanded models of Instructional Systems Technology Design often referred to as blended learning. ISTD is the systematic alignment of specific technologies with specific learning tasks, goals and objectives.

Summary

The DE Hub initiative has the potential to make invaluable contributions to distance education research and the practice of distance teaching and learning in rural Australia. Moreover, its evolution will inherently strengthen UNE's brand name in Australia and globally provided DE Hub is given the autonomy to build its infrastructure and functional operations during the first 18-24 months. The key will be to phase in key operational components of the service continuum at the right pace and by necessarily pilot testing these components.

DE Hub must also clarify and refine its mission statement in concert with building consensus around its core values. DE Hub must also be a catalyst for UNE faculty to engage in distance learning research. The credibility of DE Hub and UNE will be enhanced through increased scholarly contributions by UNE faculty in the future.