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EMERGING BEST PRACTICE IN HIGHER PROFESSIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

The education system in Kosovo has long been a tool of politics but, after the war which ended in 1999, there has been significant movement to cut this link and to realize genuine improvements in standards across the whole education sector of the country. The International Business College Mitrovica has been established as an institution of higher professional education with a view to enhancing the employability of young people and minorities, not only in the environs of the town where it is based but also in the wider region. This paper describes the efforts of both local and international staff to come to a statement of best practice across several essential aspects of the institution's activity with reference to procedures described in literature and lecturers' own career experience.

Key words: Higher Professional Vocational Education, Best Practice, Kosovo, Action Research.

Introduction. The International Business College Mitrovica (IBCM) has recently taken up the challenge of providing higher professional education in Kosovo and South Serbia with assistance from a consortium of Danish institutions of tertiary education¹ and the SPACE network that links over ninety business and language higher education institution in Europe. The background against which this undertaking is set is often characterized by the mistrust and suspicion endemic to the Balkan region – see, amongst others, Glenny (1999) and Hann and Goltz (2010).

In order that the IBCM become part of the didactic fabric of Kosovo, it is essential that the new institution succeeds in taking a position of educational leadership in the country. Murphy (2001, p.66), writing in an American context, frames a similar task as a professional “reculturing” and of creating a “framework for recasting the concept of leadership” in terms of the roles of “moral steward, educator, and community builder” . He proposes the pursuit of three themes to guide such work: institutional improvement, the development of democratic community and the pursuit of social justice. Each of these themes resonates with the task faced by the authors and our colleagues who are at the core of the day to day operation of the project. This paper will describe the early steps towards the establishment of a structure for best practice in the start-up institution.

Following an examination of the context within which the IBCM is working, we examine the general literature of benchmarking and best practice before focusing on these subjects in the context of tertiary education. We then describe a methodology grounded in action research and the ensuing method of analysis by which we arrived at a structure of best practice in the IBCM. Following a discussion of each of four emergent story lines we conclude with recommendations for future endeavours that may consolidate best practice at the institution.

Context. The education system of Kosovo “has had a long history of inseparability with the politics of the region” (BritishCouncil, 2000, p.3). However, following the war, which ended in 1999, education reform was placed under the control of Professor Michael Daxner, the Principal International Officer of the United Nation’s Mission in Kosovo’s (UNMIK’s) Transitional Administrative Department of Education, Science and Technology. Daxner drew his authority from UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which set out UNMIK’s reconstruction mandate and in the ensuing decade educational reform has, with more or less success, begun to take the direction that Daxner set when he wrote: “We are not here for the school directors, the ministers or the bureaucrats. We are here for the teachers and the students. We have to de-politicize and democratize the system. Because in the end, it is education which will play the key role in peace-building” (UNMIK, 2000).

Naturally, Kosovo has not been completely de-politicised at the time of writing and people are only too aware that the promotion of economic and political ideologies across international borders, by assiduous application educational assistance, flourished during the Cold War. Indeed, Berman (1983, p. 14) goes as far as to suggest that “U.S. philanthropic organizations offered training intending to “enculturate” or socialise a generation of African, Asian, and Latin American university graduates toward political and economic perspectives associated with the United States”.

As Murphy (ibid.) encourages those seeking a leadership position for their institution to “reculture” the educational practitioners around them whilst Berman (ibid.) warns against “enculturating” students or wider society in development contexts, the paradox in the juxtaposition of these two perceptions emphasizes the imperative that any serious educational reform initiative in contemporary Kosovo must be seen as status neutral. Such neutrality is actively pursued in all IBCM activi-

ties and we are of the view that achieving best in class status through a determined effort to implement best practice processes is one way to deflect criticisms that the IBCM is a political vehicle.

Benchmarking and Best Practice. The origins of the idea of best practice are to be found in the corporate world of the late 1970s and 1980s. Zairi and Youseff (1995) describe how Xerox Corporation developed the technique of benchmarking to regain competitive advantage in the market for document reproduction. By the late 1980s benchmarking had become a widely used process of management in industry (Camp, 1989). Interest in benchmarking spread to the public sector and higher education during the 1990s, so that Holzer and Yang (2004) were able to report that comparisons of performance measures in the form of rankings and league tables were well established at that time in public management.

In higher education today benchmarking, and the pursuit of best practice, is widespread and numerous examples exist in the literature illustrating how the technique provides objective measurements for goal-setting and improvement tracking of performance which can lead to dramatic innovations. The work of Shafer and Coate (1992) is one such example whilst in a Chinese context Liu and Oppenheim (2006) illustrate how an HEI uses competitive benchmarking to develop student focused corporate strategy, so helping the institution maintain its role in driving the forces of social development.

Drucker (1998) points out that, essentially, benchmarking assumes that what one organisation does, any organisation can do as well. The corollary of this observation is of course that for any organization, being at least as good as the leader in the field is a prerequisite of being competitive. Thus, the purpose of benchmarking is to establish what the sector leader is doing and then to emulate, or beat, those achievements by the implementation of “best practice”.

The broad literature of best practice falls into three main groups. Each of these groups has given rise to a generic literature of its own so that “comparative” aspects of the best practice paradigm are associated with benchmarking across all processes and functions of an organisation with a view to defining best-in-class or one of several other possible relative classifications, e.g. product performance or environmental friendliness. The idea of “learning” through the achievement of best practice connects, among others, to the notions of Double Loop Learning and the Learning Organisation whilst the development of techniques such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and Business Process Reengineering (BRM) are

indicative of the thirst of practitioners for recipes of “application” of best practice.

Best Practice in Tertiary Education. In their seminal work on best practice in undergraduate education, Chickering and Gamson (1987) present seven detailed prescriptions for class based procedures and activities that have become the basis of good practice statements at numerous institutions, for example Prince Georges Community College (PGCS, 2001), Howard Community College (Okpala et al., 2010) and Lincoln University (Support Department, 2010) In summary, the authors put forward the following as the foundations of good practice in undergraduate education:

1. Encouragement of contact between students and faculty
2. Development of reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. Encouragement of active learning.
4. Providing prompt feedback.
5. Emphasizing time on task.
6. Communicating high expectations.
7. Respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

Whilst these classroom customs are most certainly essential aspects of best practice we feel that the concept goes much further in the context of an institutional start-up. From a wider academic perspective Hubball and Gold's (2007, p. 9) review of reform in undergraduate programmes through curriculum change conclude that “developing, implementing, and evaluating learning-centered curricula is ... a scholarly process.” and that the achievement of best practice in the field of curriculum development requires an institutional commitment in order to improve the quality of undergraduate education. However they are adamant that there is no ‘cookbook’ or single implementation strategy to curriculum development that will suit all settings.

Nevertheless, even the best chef cannot resist seeking advice from other cooks so, if we as practitioners are to write a recipe for best practice that is relevant and exclusive to our own institution, it seems reasonable to see how others have approached the issue.

Strategies for the achievement of diversity in five European countries are examined by Reichert (2009) and she illustrates the high value placed on this characteristic by policy makers, stakeholders and administrators alike. Kyvik (2004) affirms that best practice in the quest for diversity in West European Higher Education is driven by the Bologna reforms which stress outcomes promoting the employability of graduates. Of equal importance is the creation of easier access to education to a more diverse body of students by opening enrollment to women, minorities and disadvantaged groups.

McBride et al. (2004, p. 527) working in a context (Danish vocational training) that is of interest to us, point out the importance of defining stakeholders in the institution as widely as possible but also of ensuring that the education provided be “demand driven and integrated with labour market conditions”. In order to reinforce the link to the world of work Svenson and Wood (2007) propose that internships and practical activities be placed at the heart of the vocational curriculum.

Notwithstanding the importance of the practical aspect of vocational education it is as important that students think deeply about underlying theory (Singleton & Newman, 2009). These same authors draw on Bloom’s (1956) classical taxonomy of learning objectives and propose that classroom discussion should be structured so that students to move from the simple acquisition of knowledge through comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis to evaluating the initial information. They also propose a concrete approach to educational writing in an age of fast developing technologies that add many alternatives to the traditional essay or report. The idea of writing the “one essential question” after a class and of using reflective journals, reading journals, learning logs to record the progress of learning is presented as an important aspects of best practice. These are of course classroom oriented procedures and they resonate with Chickering and Gamson’s (ibid.) foundations for undergraduate education discussed above.

Once the institution is an established working entity, Higbee et al. (2004, p. 14) make clear that attention must turn to the question of student retention: “In order to encourage retention, it is imperative that faculty teaching first-year courses communicate to students that they are welcomed and valued.”. Whilst recognising the crucial contribution of student retention to success, we are tempted to observe that in the Western Balkans, where little has been permanent for at least the last twenty five years, a whole generation has come to adulthood without a sense of long term commitment. Asking a Serbian, Roma or Kosovar eighteen year old to pledge for a seven semester Bachelor programme must seem to many of the young people at the IBCM like signing their life away – who knows what next month will bring, let alone next year?

Conraths and Trusso (2007) are clear that establishing good practice in the management of Universities requires a sense of urgency on the part of academic managers and the early creation of targets, perhaps by means of the now traditional vision and mission statements. In practical terms they advocate the creation of a supportive infrastructure through which a

management team may make clear decisions that encourage the organisation to progress.

Equally important in terms of management processes are the structures that are used to assist in the management of teaching staff. Fullan (2001) discusses the importance of sustained professional development and mentorship to the long-term improvement of professional competence and engagement among faculty. In practical terms, Florio-Ruane and deTar (2001) demonstrate that it is by reflection through frequent conversations about themselves, their practice and classroom experiences that professional learning opportunities for lecturers are maximised.

Results and the Structure of Best Practice in the IBCM. Four combined story lines were arrived at through this analysis and were named as follows:

1. Student Focus
2. Curriculum Management
3. The World of Work
4. Institution Building

The diagram below illustrates the eleven categories of best practice activity derived from literature in the left hand column and shows, in the right hand column, the four combined story lines of best practice that emerged through synthesis from the perspective of IBCM staff views and experience.

Shortcomings and implications for future work. It should be noted that this paper was written based on nine months of co-operation between the partners who are establishing the IBCM. During that time Tuckman’s (1965) usual stages of group formation, namely forming, norming, storming and performing, have been passed through by all those involved and we, the authors, are confident that a solid foundation has been build for the development of the ICBM. However, nine months is a very short time in which to establish a fully functioning institution of tertiary education and we are aware that much remains to be done.

Much of our daily work is focused on ensuring that what we have come to call best practice at the IBCM really does become daily practice and second nature to all those involved. In order to achieve this the next phase of our work will involve us in expanding activities to include blended e-learning and an extensive programme of guest lectures given by experts from the SPACE network. We expect that through the e-learning activity we can put students in Kosovo in direct contact with their peers in Denmark and that the guest lecturing will provide a rich cross cultural context for the IBCM programme.

Beyond these practical enhancements of best practice, monitoring and evaluating activities both within and outside the institution will need to be instituted. We are aware that we will need to find ways to provide students, fac-

ulty and management, as well as outside stakeholders, with feedback that will allow them to continue to improve their practice. The iterative nature of continuous improvement will only drive excellence if all participants in the project are committed to such aims. For now we have no reason to doubt this, but future research will examine our success in taking the project forward to the next level.

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ПОЛ СУДНИК

ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ ЛУЧШЕЙ ПРАКТИКИ В ВЫСШЕМ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНО-ТЕХНИЧЕСКОМ ОБРАЗОВАНИИ КОСОВО

Система образования в Косово долго была инструментом политики, но, после войны, которая закончилась в 1999, произошло существенное движение, чтобы сократить эту связь и реализовать усовершенствования стандартов всего сектора образования страны. Международный Коммерческий колледж Митровица был образован как учреждение более высокого профессионального образования в целях усиления возможности трудоустройства молодых людей и меньшинств, не только в окрестностях города, где базируется колледж, но также и в более широкой области. Данная статья описывает усилия как местного, так и международного штата колледжа, чтобы прийти к утверждению лучшей практики в нескольких существенных аспектах деятельности учреждения, ссылаясь на процедуры, описанные в литературе и собственном опыте преподавателей.

Ключевые слова: высшее профессионально-техническое образование, лучшая практика, Косово, исследование деятельности.

ПОЛ СУДНИК

ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ КРАЩОЇ ПРАКТИКИ У ВИЩІЙ ПРОФЕСІЙНО-ТЕХНІЧНІЙ ОСВІТІ КОСОВО

Система освіти у Косово довго була інститутом політики, але, після війни, яка закінчилася 1999 року, відбулися суттєві зміни, аби скоротити цей зв'язок і реалізувати удосконалення стандартів усього сектора освіти. Міжнародний Комерційний коледж Митровица був утворений як заклад більш високої професійної освіти з метою посилення можливостей працевлаштування молодих людей та меншості, які мешкають не лише у передмісті, де базується коледж, а також і по всій області. Стаття описує зусилля як місцевого, так і міжнародного штату коледжу, аби перейти до утвердження кращої практики у декількох суттєвих аспектах діяльності закладу, посиляючись на процедури, описані у літературі та особистісному досвіді викладачів.

Ключові слова: вища професійно-технічна освіта, краща практика, Косово, дослідження діяльності.