The Brisbane Universities Languages Alliance (BULA): A collaborative framework for university languages provision in South-East Queensland

Abstract

This contribution describes the introduction and progress of a languages alliance between three universities in South-East Queensland. The agreement was initially for three years from 2009 to 2011, and recently it was agreed that the arrangement would continue.

There is insufficient space to include all the details of how BULA came into being and then how it has evolved over time. The discussion here focuses primarily on the initial objectives of BULA and relates it to other initiatives of a similar kind, as described in the relevant literature. It also looks at the strategic decisions that took the agreement from a purely organisational arrangement (Phase I: 2009, 2010) to one which involved academic staff conducting research collaboratively (Phase II: 2011–).

Inevitably, the two authors of this contribution have their own particular orientation and perspective so this text cannot be said to be impartial. Instead, it strives to present some of the key issues and decision-making that occurred as the practical relationship between universities was fleshed out and differences were resolved. The first author of this contribution was only involved indirectly in the alliance to begin with, as Head of School of one of the participating universities; this role changed when he became Director of BULA halfway through the agreement in July 2010. The second author began her role as a research fellow associated with the alliance at the same time.

This contribution is written with the potential collaborating university in mind such that others contemplating a similar arrangement with other universities will have a sense of the hurdles and some of the key decision-making processes. It is careful not to underestimate the administrative challenges when putting such an arrangement together, and tries not to dodge some of the more sensitive issues that inevitably arise when perspectives vary. Our hope is that the text is helpful in a practical way through its suggestions and examples.
1. Introduction

Why should universities collaborate around languages provision? According to White and Baldauf (2006: 3): “Given the current financial and structural pressures on languages, particularly those of small enrolment, or those needing to maintain units/subjects with smaller enrolments, developing good collaborative models would appear to be one way to maintain language teaching vitality.” Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens (2008: 23) add: “The primary rationale for the introduction of the collaborative provision of languages is a commitment to the provision of a wide range of languages in the tertiary sector. This includes supporting languages of smaller candidature, which may have a fairly specific target group…” There are other advantages too — especially when one considers the limited resources available and the potential for sharing those resources — and yet collaboration, especially between universities in close proximity to one another, is complex and challenging for all parties involved.

2. Setting the scene: Findings from previous studies

In the Australian context three studies stand out in their relevance to the question of collaboration and innovation in the provision of Languages Other than English (LOTE) in Australian universities. The first, by Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko (2006), sought to review, synthesise and analyse local, national and international assessments and reports on the provision and delivery of LOTEs in higher education in Australia and overseas. The second, by White and Baldauf (2006) sought to identify and analyse collaborative arrangements between local, national and international partners for the delivery of LOTEs in the Australian higher education sector. The third by Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens (2008) set forth different models of collaboration for Languages Other than English in Australian higher education and evaluates their strengths and limitations. These three reports provide a reliable foundation for thinking about innovation and collaboration between universities with regard to languages provision in Australia.

The Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko (2006) review is comprehensive in its systematic analysis and synthesis of the terrain, from both contemporary and historical perspectives. It evaluates many reports, studies and policy documents on innovation and collaboration in the provision of higher education languages programs. The authors received six submissions from Australian universities documenting the ‘insider experience’ relating to various kinds of collaboration. The review identified 14 factors from the Australian data that facilitated successful innovation and collaboration schemes and 17 factors that inhibited their success. The authors then summarised the facilitating factors that emerged from the data and proposed them as a guide. Three areas were highlighted: (1) management, administration and implementation procedures; (2) pedagogy-led technology applications; and (3) interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships (Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko 2006:...
138–139). The first area is pivotal and was neatly summarised by Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens (2008: 43), as follows:

- Identifiable, concrete and specifiable need for the collaboration
- Explicit and timed contracts
- Clear conceptualisation of all parties’ roles and obligations
- Easily contactable dedicated staff, both academic and administrative
- Clear cross institutional and intra-institutional information flows
- Cross institutional checks to identify potential incompatibilities and
- Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and assessment

Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko (2006: 138–139) stressed the critical importance of strong, positive relationships, both internally and with partners; they describe uncertain relationships as “the ‘sleeper factor’, the unspoken and unnamed cause, of many failures of innovation and, much more so, of failed collaborations”.

The White and Baldauf (2006) report takes a different, though complementary approach, perhaps best summarised as concentrating on a smaller number of specific instances of recent collaborations between Australian universities. Its primary goal was to identify and prioritise the financial and pedagogic factors relevant for the evaluation and assessment of course provision and teaching and learning. The following four points were emphasised and all have high relevance for the present endeavour described in this contribution:

Overall, a major concern in terms of establishing and then administering collaborative arrangements was the impact on students.

Another major issue is the sheer administrative load that is required to make a collaborative arrangement work. This includes the formalisation of arrangements, and trying to fit different processes and institutional cultures together as seamlessly as possible. There is also the perennial issue of fee structures and enrolment procedures, relating both to students and to administration.

The difficulties in establishing and then administering collaborative arrangements are rather like a complex set of treaties between nation states. Universities are independent entities, accredited by the respective states and territories, each with their own requirements and regulations. In order for collaborative arrangements to work, there must be a firm commitment on both (or many) sides to make the arrangements work, which will entail negotiation, ongoing liaison, and relaxation of hitherto rigid rules and requirements.

While there was some scepticism from respondents about the value of collaborative efforts, these were outweighed substantially by universities who have successfully generated these arrangements, even with ongoing problems related as part of this report. (White and Baldauf 2006: 37)

3. Model 2 Collaborative City-Based Model of Language Provision

The model of collaboration used by the BULA is based upon the so-called Model 2 Collaborative City-Based Model of Language Provision (see Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens 2008). In 2008, Model 2 collaborations existed in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney and involved nine institutions. The relative ease of enrolment for students, especially cross-enrolment, was repeatedly emphasised as a critical issue, and a factor directly influencing actual enrolments (Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens 2008: 4), reflecting the findings in other studies such as Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko (2006) and Winter (2009). Other factors reported as having a negative impact were a significant and persistent imbalance in student enrolments (e.g. University of Adelaide and Flinders University), and significantly different understandings of the arrangement among staff at the collaborating institutions. In at least one case, staff felt that the decision to collaborate was imposed from above — with little or no consultation at the time arrangements were made (Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens 2008: 22). Further difficulties included:

- Student marks — issues (p. 28)
- Program and curriculum issues — in the majority of cases: semester length and semester breaks do not match up, and differences in the weighting of subjects across institutions must also be taken into account. (p. 29)
- Web-based learning systems (p. 30-31)

For the collaborative arrangements that were working, Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens (2008: 21) stressed the crucial importance of goodwill from academic and administrative staff. In any collaborative strategic initiative, staff need to be properly informed and consulted, valued and rewarded for their efforts in ways that are meaningful in their career and context. The insights gained through a close reading of these three studies proved to be of immense value in setting objectives and strategies for the BULA.

4. The implementation of the Brisbane Universities Languages Alliance (BULA)

In 2008, three Brisbane-based universities, The University of Queensland (UQ), Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and Griffith University (Griffith), were awarded $2,271,000 under the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)’s Diversity and Structural Reform Grant program, for a project that was aimed in broad terms at streamlining languages
provision across the three participating universities while accommodating more effectively languages with low enrolments. The project was described by the then Dean of Arts, University of Queensland (Fotheringham 2009: 1), as having the following features:

- QUT ceased teaching French, Japanese, German and Indonesian and closed its Language Centre (located in the Business School), retaining only Mandarin.
- UQ undertook to teach, by cross-institutional enrolment, QUT students in these four languages, including offering introductory-level units in French and Japanese at QUT’s Gardens Point campus. All other classes are at UQ’s St Lucia campus. QUT students are also able to enrol in other languages offered by UQ or by Griffith.
- Griffith closed down its Indonesian and Korean programs, retaining only Mandarin, Japanese, Spanish and Italian.
- UQ undertook to teach, by cross-institutional enrolment, Griffith students in those two languages including teaching Korean at Griffith’s Nathan and Gold Coast campuses. Griffith students are also able to enrol in other languages offered only by UQ: French, German, and Russian.
- UQ students are able to study Italian offered by Griffith.

After the changes had all been implemented, the profile of the languages taught at the three institutions was as follows: Mandarin Chinese is offered by separate programs at all three universities in the BULA, Japanese and Spanish are offered by separate programs at two of the BULA universities, while the remaining languages are only provided by a single university, either the University of Queensland or Griffith (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Languages offered across BULA*

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With regard to project governance, matters were decided collaboratively in consultation with partner universities. A Steering Committee is responsible for overseeing the implementation and operation of the Project, including the determination of guiding principles for collaboration for the term of the project and beyond. It is composed of senior representatives of the three universities. Administrative matters are managed via an Operational Committee made up of senior administrative personnel from the three universities. Policy matters that cannot be resolved by the Operational Group are referred to the senior Steering Committee. Note also that in the next iteration of the alliance a third committee will be added, an Academic Planning Committee (see Section 6.1).

The reports on collaborative arrangements between universities described earlier in this contribution emphasise the importance of a formal legal agreement between the key participants. For the BULA, it was necessary that all three universities understand and agree on their obligations under the contract from DEEWR. The Agreement was signed in December 2009, approximately one year into the agreement.

5. Three perspectives, one collaboration...

It is instructive to consider the BULA from the perspective of each university partner since the perspectives differ somewhat; views also tend to differ according to one’s primary role within each university (e.g., teacher, administrator, manager), the level and responsibilities of the individual concerned (e.g. language coordinator, Head of School, Pro-Vice Chancellor), and the language in focus. Particular administrative issues, challenges and solutions vary from one university to the next, and individuals can be working with very different sets of priorities and constraints. Three brief university perspectives follow, and while they were mostly drawn from an extensive consultation period with staff after the Director was appointed, there also needs to be a caveat that the authors inevitably have their own take on matters.

5.1 The University of Queensland

The University of Queensland (UQ) currently offers the majority of the languages of the three universities and is the only provider of six of the ten languages now available (see Table 1). As the Collaboration Agreement was principally between DEEWR and UQ (the ‘Head Agreement’), it has been UQ’s responsibility to lead, coordinate and resolve the administrative arrangements with the partners. This has proved an enormously complex, time-consuming task because of the numerous differences between the three universities in enrolment procedures, timetabling, credit transfer and curriculum, among many other differences. A particular problem concerned placing QUT students of Japanese in UQ courses because of fundamental differences in program/course offerings, curriculum content and weighting. Accommodating
these students required very substantial restructuring of the UQ Japanese program with all the attendant pressures on the staff involved.

BULA matters were also raised in a review of the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies (SLCCS) at the University of Queensland in 2010. In the Executive Summary, the Review stated:

SLCCS has responded admirably to the recent challenges it has faced with the creation of the Brisbane Universities Languages Hub. However, there remain significant administrative challenges at inter-university level (such as credit transfer, course visibility, fee structure, and GPA calculation) as well as differences between the three partners in their vision for the BULH.

At the time, these two essential points, the administrative structure and different perspectives on the vision for BULA were fundamental in managing the project, and much work has been completed since 2010 to understand and resolve any differences in perspective that arose.

5.2 Griffith University

While the School of Languages and Linguistics (LAL) at Griffith University (Griffith) offers fewer languages than UQ, its stance on languages provision is similar. It is concerned with promoting and expanding the study of languages at school and university, innovation in language pedagogy (especially in blended and online learning), and developing research strengths. Four LOTE languages are retained at Griffith with one offered at all BULA universities, two offered at two universities and one offered at Griffith exclusively (see Table 1).

Griffith University is also the only member of the BULA to have a large and growing campus significantly outside the metropolitan area of Brisbane on the Gold Coast, currently teaching Japanese and Spanish (first–third year), Italian (first year) and Mandarin (first year; second year subject to demand, plus advanced Chinese-English interpreting and translating). At first glance, Griffith may appear to serve a different geographical region compared to the other two Brisbane-based campuses. However at Griffith’s South Bank campus in metropolitan Brisbane, languages were being offered for the first time in 2011 (Spanish: first year, subject to demand; Italian: first year, subject to demand).

As with the other partners, Griffith had to make many time-consuming administrative decisions when the BULA was first introduced, particularly with regard to cross-enrolments procedures and grading. A particular and ongoing problem from Griffith’s perspective has been with UQ’s position on the way in which grades are reported for UQ students doing Italian; in this instance, students’ marks do not contribute to the students’ Grade Point Average (GPA) and this has caused concern among Griffith staff who believe it has had a very negative effect on ongoing UQ student enrolments in Italian. Attempts have been made to try and address this issue with the Academic Board at UQ but so far with no success.
5.3 Queensland Institute of Technology

In 2008, Queensland Institute of Technology (QUT) ceased teaching French, Japanese, German and Indonesian and closed its Language Centre (located in the Business School), retaining only Mandarin in the QUT Business School in the discipline area of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations. QUT does not now have a community of language teaching staff and students who identify as a School of Languages and, in this sense, QUT’s situation is different from the other two universities in the partnership. It is one of the duties of the BULA leadership to ensure that QUT students are not disadvantaged as a result. With this in mind, a number of focus groups and surveys have been conducted with QUT students.

Cross-enrolling was a particularly complex process in the first year of the BULA for students at all three participating universities, but especially for students at QUT. Great efforts were made to overcome these hurdles, both through direct communication with individual students and via the Web portal. Other issues reflected those raised in previous reports discussed earlier, relating to the transition process, communication, timetabling (especially during exam periods), teaching and learning differences and the grading system.

After the initial, transitional cohort of QUT students had completed their studies, a major challenge for BULA and QUT has been to maintain enrolments in languages no longer offered directly by the home university. Word of mouth from on-campus academics supporting the study of languages has been shown to be one important factor in achieving strong enrolments and this is not so straightforward now without languages staff of the home institution physically present on-site. This point is addressed as part of Strategy 2 below. Also key is the availability of the relevant information and the ease with which students may enrol cross-institutionally. QUT’s new course management system, introduced in 2011, made UQ and Griffith language courses more visible to students when planning their degrees; further developments on the BULA website are helping to address any remaining enrolment difficulties.

6. Leadership and strategy development

Thus far in this study, we have established the contextual framework of the BULA, and we have added a perspective giving each university’s viewpoint, as understood by the authors. It is clear from the discussion of BULA that many of the challenges noted in the literature earlier have also arisen during the current project, especially issues relating to managing the administrative load, timetabling issues and cross-enrolment processes. Under the leadership of the Director of BULA these matters have been given high priority.

In navigating a path forward, enabling leadership is essential. It is perhaps the over-riding factor. In the case of BULA, the Director did not commence his tenure until exactly halfway through the initial three-year agreement. A key challenge initially
was to canvass and absorb the many viewpoints and opinions on BULA, ranging from individual perspectives through to those of the leaders of the various language teams at each university and the senior management. Also it should not be forgotten that the setting is a dynamic one. Each university will independently and continually reassess its own position vis-à-vis the collective and whether, from its point of view, the advantages of the arrangement continue to outweigh any negatives. For the Director, perceived conflicts of interest also had to be managed successfully as the Director was employed by one of the participating universities.

With these points in mind, the remainder of this contribution considers the leadership role, particularly in relation to the development and implementation of a key strategy paper. This paper was presented and then discussed at length at a BULA Staff Forum in February 2011 at the beginning of the third year of the original agreement. While there were numerous other matters relating to leadership, the strategy paper is highlighted here because of its visibility and impact across the alliance, from academic and administrative staff to senior management. The strategies have been formulated to account for the varying contexts and perspectives described earlier. Further, as a post-BULA implementation plan, the strategies attempt to shift the focus of this initiative beyond operational matters (Phase I) toward a stage that is more heavily weighted toward collaborative research, pedagogy, student engagement and retention (Phase II).

6.1 The strategy paper

Following his appointment, the Director initiated a full consultation process with all stakeholders, not only at the three collaborating universities with both academic and administrative staff, but also externally with leading experts in university collaborations (specifically Professors John Hajek and Joe Lo Bianco of the University of Melbourne). Consultations extended to other language-related entities in the region including Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ), and the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), professional organisations such as the Modern Language Teachers Association of Queensland (MLTAQ), and the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations (AFMLTA), and with high schools in the region. These consultations resulted in a Strategy Paper with five key strategies as listed below.

**Strategy 1: Collaboration**

To strengthen and expand collaboration around languages education in South-East Queensland

**Strategy 2: Communication, roles and responsibilities**

To strengthen communication through greater clarification of the support roles, responsibilities and reporting procedures within and between all three BULA universities
Strategy 3: Promotion and outreach

1. To build productive relationships between school and university language education.
2. To build positive perceptions around languages that lead to a strengthening of enrolments across all the universities.
3. To strengthen relationships with South-East Queensland schools and professional societies such as the MLTAQ.
4. To develop the BULA website.

Strategy 4: Pedagogy, ICTs and blended learning

1. To actively promote, share and encourage the application and development of learning and teaching practices that are innovative, especially in terms of language pedagogies, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and blended learning.
2. To support and encourage scholarly activities that collect evidence on the effectiveness, and viability of innovative language pedagogies, ICTs and blended learning models and strategies.

Strategy 5: Research

To conduct two foundational research projects:

1. To evaluate the current BULA, especially in terms of stated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), impact and the students’ experience.
2. To develop and evaluate the transition from school to university for language students with a view to identifying the underlying beliefs, motivations, barriers and enablers for students and the potential for innovative pedagogies, ICT integration and blended learning approaches.

The main objectives of these strategies was to strengthen and expand collaboration around languages education in the region, particularly with a view to building productive relationships between school and university language education, to reinforce positive perceptions of languages in order to strengthen enrolments across all the universities; and to strengthen relationships with South-East Queensland schools and professional societies such as the MLTAQ. It was considered that fostering collaborations would be critical to the ongoing success of the languages alliance, focussing on the key, principal alliance between the three universities, and encompassing other language-related entities at both regional and national levels.

On the national scene, a significant development has been the inaugural Colloquium of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) at Melbourne University in September, 2011. The Director of BULA was one of the plenary speakers at this conference and has recently become a member of
the LCNAU Reference Group. This is of relevance because LCNAU represents a mirror on a national level of BULA at a regional level, in South-East Queensland. LCNAU’s ‘Principles’ are very similar to BULA’s six strategies and were conceived around the same time (see the Introduction to this volume). There are advantages on both sides in furthering collaboration and communication, and ensuring both initiatives are aligned appropriately.

Other critical BULA strategies were aimed primarily at moving the focus of the languages alliance towards supporting and enhancing the language student experience and developing the alliance as a viable and sustainable language provision model. As part of this shift in focus, an Academic Planning Committee will be established in 2012 with representatives from all BULA universities. The brief of this committee concerns the provision of professional development for language teachers, the further development of curriculum (including the potential delivery of additional languages), and the development and maintenance of links with state and national language teacher associations and networks such as MLTAQ and LCNAU. Furthermore, the committee will promote the sharing and dissemination of best practice pedagogies and actively pursue opportunities to undertake collaborative research into Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and new ways of language learning and delivery. This focus on research is central to the work of this committee in order to inform further activities and actions to strengthen and expand the alliance.

6.2 The research strategy

In developing an initial research strategy for the BULA, we considered it essential to: (1) meet existing commitments on the BULA and deliver on the expectations and formal requirements of the original grant; (2) move the project forward into a more mature and pedagogically innovative, second phase; and (3) conduct initial research projects that will provide an evidence-based approach to (1) and (2) and that will contribute toward research outcomes that further promulgate a strong culture of scholarship and research across the BULA universities.

The first research project was designed to meet the formal reporting requirements for the BULA. It sought to evaluate the implementation of the BULA according to the stated KPI’s and the original drivers for adopting the model. This included identifying patterns of student enrolment at the three universities, especially cross-enrolment, and any structural impediments to the study of a particular language at a particular university. This project built upon and extended findings of previous evaluations of collaborative models (e.g. Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens 2008; Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko 2006; White and Baldauf 2006), and examined the variables that had been previously identified as facilitating or hindering collaborative language provision arrangements. Careful consideration is also given to saving languages with marginal enrolments and adding new languages via the BULA. The data generated will contribute to a report that makes evidence-based recommendations to further strengthen and refine BULA activities and arrangements and contribute to the viability and sustainability of the model more generally.
The second research project is a collaborative and shared effort of researchers from across the BULA. It focuses on matters relating to the language student experience, especially in the transition from school to university, as well as issues concerned with engagement, retention and student use of ICTs. Through focusing on the needs of students, it was envisaged that projects in this category will contribute to the long-term aims of the BULA as a viable and sustainable language provision model. It may also shed light on the potential for differential pedagogical practices across the BULA. Through investigating students’ beliefs about their pedagogical and technological transition from school to university, their underlying motivations, barriers and enablers will be explored. Further, student perspectives on various ICT-integrated pedagogical models and the potential for the provision of blended learning experiences will be a focus. This project aims to identify new data that will assist university teachers to make informed choices about their pedagogical approaches (particularly for first and second year undergraduate studies), their integration of ICTs, and the ways they might design effective student-centred, blended learning experiences across the BULA.

The data collection for the first two projects is now complete. The survey has been delivered to students at all three BULA universities; with focus groups conducted throughout October 2011. So far this project has surveyed 3,170 students in languages across the three universities with a response rate overall of 24.7% (n=782). The results of this work are being shared across BULA language programs with the dual aims of promoting collaborative research publication in 2012 – 2013 and promoting further research and scholarship that builds on current findings.

7. Conclusions

The original BULA application was prompted by a need to strengthen languages in South-East Queensland and it was recognised that the best way to do this would be through collaboration. By establishing the BULA, the three universities have coordinated their efforts to ensure the continuing availability of ‘for-award’ tertiary study of languages, particularly low enrolment languages such as Indonesian and Korean. Enrolments have been encouraged by each of the Universities promoting the study of languages at their own and at other universities in the partnership and this is reflected in the growth of student numbers. Prior to the commencement of the BULA, fewer than six percent of school leavers in Queensland completed a Year 12 LOTE subject, leading to very weak enrolment levels at all universities and threatening the survival of marginal languages. The collaborative arrangements have served to provide tertiary language learning to a larger pool of students from several universities. Through rationalisation of tertiary teaching activities, duplication has been reduced and efficiencies in course offerings generated.

There is no doubt that bringing three universities together around languages provision is an ambitious and highly complex task with numerous factors ultimately
influencing the effectiveness of the relationship. Judging by past experiences, it should not be surprising that such endeavours are immensely challenging for all concerned. Nonetheless, some collaborative agreements work very effectively. Of the collaborations that have worked successfully, Hajek, Slaughter and Stevens (2008: 44) conclude:

The best performing arrangements were, not surprisingly, those which show long-term continuity in terms of both teaching and administrative personnel, better communication and responsiveness between parties, as well as personal satisfaction and commitment by individual staff members. Of course, sufficient student demand is also required to justify maintaining the arrangement but without generating too much of a financial cost on the home University.

Earlier reports and studies, as well as our discussion here of BULA, explain in some detail what conditions are required to enable a collaboration to work. Clearly leadership and commitment from the collaborating universities are paramount, not only at the senior management level, but at all levels, administrative and academic, across the participating universities. There needs to be a collective will to engage, contribute and succeed in the relationship, especially at times when opinions or perspectives may differ.

Notes

1. For the first three years of the Brisbane Universities Language Alliance (BULA) it was known officially as the Brisbane Universities Language Hub (BULH), even though the label ‘alliance’ had been used by many participants from the outset. At the final Steering Committee meeting in 2011, as the original agreement was about to come to a close, it was agreed unanimously that the term ‘Alliance’ rather than ‘Hub’ was preferred. This was felt by all to be a more fitting term to describe the ongoing relationship between the three universities. The more recent appellation is used throughout in this contribution.

References

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