

# Chapter 8

## Southern Skies Distance Education Academic Exchange Project: Building a Community of Practice

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### ABSTRACT

*In order to combine forces and experiences to overcome current challenges faced by distance education providers in Australia and South America, specifically in Brazil and Argentina, leading distance education institutions from both worlds decided to develop the Southern Skies Distance Education Academic Exchange Project. Funded by the Council on Australia Latin America Relations, this project promoted academic exchange between four Australian universities collaborating as DEHub and four educational institutions in South America: two institutions in Argentina and two in Brazil. This chapter presents the two stages of this exchange project during which visits by representatives from participating institutions were reciprocated. It also highlights some of the challenges faced by the project participants. Finally, it discusses the opportunities that have emerged for further exchange and collaboration amongst the institutions involved.*

### SETTING THE SCENE

In comparison with Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the United States, distance education is a relatively new model of delivering higher education in South America. However, higher distance education in South America has grown considerably in the last decade due to the

influences of new policies for educational reform, along with national government incentives and programs. The need to meet the growing demand of students seeking higher and continuing education appears, also, to have increasingly motivated distance education initiatives in South America. In fact, such an increase in student numbers has been a phenomenon around the world and is one of the driving forces for change in contemporary higher education (Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalić-Trumbić,

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2007; Klemencic & Fried, 2007). Some of the challenges faced by distance higher education providers in South America today include a lack of technological infrastructure including slow Internet connection, under-developed technical skills in both students and staff, and academics poorly qualified to teach at a distance (Bossu, 2009).

These issues are of mutual concern to South American and Australian distance education institutions. However, Australia is working towards overcoming many of the difficulties and challenges regarding distance education, but it still has issues in common with countries like Argentina and Brazil. In Australia, where higher education is one of the top five most profitable industries, educational institutions need to rigorously compete against each other for domestic and international student enrolments. Australian universities also face the challenge of attracting future students with a wide range of new courses while meeting current students' needs; institutions need to ensure new enrolment numbers at least meet, but hopefully supersede, the minimum number of enrolments required for their business model (Dearn, Fraser, & Ryan, 2002; Nunan, 2005; Snyder, Marginson, & Lewis, 2007).

In order to work together to overcome current challenges faced by distance education providers in Brazil and Argentina and in Australia, leading distance education institutions from both worlds decided to develop the Southern Skies Distance Education Academic Exchange project (from this point referred to as 'the project'). Funded by the Australian Government's Council on Australia Latin America Relations (COALAR), this project promoted academic exchange between four leading Australian universities collaborating as DEHub (Distance Education Hub), and four educational institutions in South America—two in Argentina and two in Brazil. The overall goals of the project were to improve distance education practices and quality, enhance best practices in distance education and provide a more socially inclusive and accessible educational atmosphere within the

Australian and South American higher education sectors. In addition, the primary, immediate objective was to establish inter-institutional links that would foster direct, mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, systems and practices between distance education providers in the higher education sectors of both regions.

DEHub, based at the University of New England in Australia, is a federally funded central agency that promotes knowledge transfer in about best practice in distance education. DEHub also supports national and global collaborations on evidence-based approaches to the effective and efficient employment of new technologies for distance education. The DEHub consortium includes four of the largest distance education providers in Australia: the University of New England (UNE), Central Queensland University (CQU), the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and Charles Sturt University (CSU). The fifth partner, Massey University from New Zealand, joined after the project had started.

DEHub invited four South American educational institutions to the project. The Argentinean partners institutions the University of Morón and the National University of Quilmes. The Brazilian partners were the Online-Distance Education Unit at Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV Online) and the Brazilian Association for Distance Education (ABED).

In May 2010, one representative from each of the four participating South American institutions took part in an academic exchange visit to each of the DEHub partner institutions. In the second stage of the project, in August–September 2010, one representative from each of the five DEHub partners made a reciprocal trip to Argentina and Brazil. The academic representative from UNE is a Brazilian national who provided language interpretation for the group. In addition, another academic colleague from UNE, originally from Chile, took part in the visit and he also assisted with language, management and organisation of the project.

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