Critical Success Factors in the Delivery of International Distance
Education Programs
 Preliminary Report
Alan Jolliffe, Educational and Staff Development Department, Singapore
Polytechnic, joliffa@sp.ac.sg

This paper reports on the critical success factors in delivery of
international distance education programs. Specifically, it focuses on
the Sheffield University Master of Education program conducted at
Singapore Polytechnic for lecturers. The students of the course
(co-participants) completed a questionnaire about the course as a first
part of the evaluative process. The results of the questionnaires
indicate, in the opinion of the co-participants, that the course is
meeting its desired aims. The co-participants have indicated that they
are very satisfied with the course and have made some suggestions for
improving it. The critical success factors of this course appear to be:
learning materials which are relevant and 'user friendly'; adapted for
local conditions; a course that teaches skills and knowledge that will
make the co-participants better lecturers; availability of an on-site
tutor, provision of tutorials and intensive study schools, and a
course that allows interaction between students. One of the major
reasons for the success of the course is the presence of the on-site
tutor.

Introduction
On April the fifteenth, 1996, The Straits Times, the local Singaporean
newspaper, advertised twenty-five distance Masters programs, in
different subject areas, offered by overseas universities. This a
considerable number considering the population of Singapore is just
below three million. The demand in Singapore and other countries should
increase in the future, particularly where places in local universities
are limited. Any study which tries to determine how universities can
more effectively deliver their distance education programs in different
countries and cultures should benefit both the universities and the
students.

The Sheffield University Master of Education
The Sheffield University Master of Education (Sheffield Masters) is
conducted at a distant in the UK, Singapore, Hong Kong and a number of
other countries. Since the environments, cultures, students and
logistical constraints vary, the course is modified for delivery in
different countries, although the module notes are similar for all.

At Singapore Polytechnic the Sheffield Masters is conducted for
lecturing staff. The course has been operating for four years. There
have been three cohorts of students, although the third cohort has only
recently commenced. There is anecdotal evidence that the Sheffield
Masters is highly successful at Singapore Polytechnic. The tutors
believe that the academic work of the students is of a high standard.

In addition, the drop-out rate of the course is zero at present,
although the students number only twenty-six for the first two cohorts.

Various writers have documented problems with distance education
courses operating in the Asian environment. These include:
ïpoor marks on assignments,
ïsome students fail their thesis or have to re-submit it with major
revisions,
ïmany students don't attend tutorials,
ïsome students don't follow their tutors' advice,
ïstudents' level of English literacy is 'poor',
ïsome students fail to complete their course, (Hiola and Moss, 1989,

Selim, 1987, Rakhmat et al, 1988).

There is little in the distance education literature on the delivery of
courses internationally. The questions which arise are why does the
Sheffield Masters operate so successful, and what are the critical
success factors. Can these critical success factors be applied to the
delivery of other international distance education programs.

Holt, Petzall and Viljoen (1990) reported on longitudinal study of MBA
students at Deakin University. To these students the idea of quality,
which includes some critical success factors, in a distance education
was:
ïflexibility in organising study time around other life commitments,
ïa well organised study program,
ïstudy materials despatch on time or early,
ïopportunities to interact with peers,
ïstaff who make themselves available when required,
ïthe workload remains constant and manageable over the length of the
course,
ïdiverse, consistent and balanced formal assessment requirements. (p
167)

When considering international distance education courses other factors
need to be take into account such as the:
ïpolitical and cultural background of the students,
ïtechnological stage of development of the students' country,
ïlevel of collaboration between the distance education institutions, if
a local institution is involved,

The Research
This research focuses on the Sheffield University Master of Education
conducted at Singapore Polytechnic for lecturers at the Polytechnic. It
examines the course structure and delivery method in the context of the
Polytechnic and the Singaporean environment. The study attempts to
determine the critical factors in the delivery of this course that

appear to make it so successful.

The research will address two related issues: How has the course been adapted for offer in Singapore and what are the beliefs that have guided this adaptation? Which features of the course are considered by staff and students to be critical to its success and which features could be improved?

Research Method
A broad case study approach has been used in this research. A case study involves the detailed examination of a single example of situation. Isaac and Michael (1981) describes the function of a case study:

To study intensively the background, current status, and environmental interactions of a given social unit: an individual, group, institution or community. (p 48)

A case study approach has been used because it is suitable for an individual researcher and can be used for an in-depth study for a limited time span. Case studies are useful for generating new hypotheses which can be tested against other data in the study. In general, case studies make no claim to be representative and therefore, it is difficult to generalise on the basis of a particular case.

A case study is not a single method of research but it can be seen as a focus for enquiry. I agree with Gobly's (1989) concept of a case study:

It is seen instead as a focus for enquiry; the case is the subject for enquiry. By what methods this enquiry is to be undertaken is an open question, not a matter of principle. Methodology is a matter of what is appropriate and possible, given the research situation and its aims. (p 168)

The methods used in case study therefore depend on the aims and focus of the enquiry and what is practical and feasible. The case in my particular study is the Sheffield Masters conducted at Singapore Polytechnic and the focus of the enquiry is to identify and analyse the critical factors which makes the course successful.

A literature review has been conducted to indicate what the critical success factors of a distance education program are likely to be. These appear to be: how well students integrate their course into their home, work and academic environment, the extent to which the course is adapted for local conditions and culture, the level of infrastructure matching the delivery method, standard of academic support given and the level of co-operation between the collaborating institutions.

On the basis of the literature review and discussions with the Sheffield tutors, two questionnaires have been developed, one for tutors and the other for students (co-participants). The tutors' questionnaire attempts to determine how and why the course has been adapted and how it could be improved. The co-participants' questionnaire attempts to find how effective the course has been and how it could be improved. Presently, only the co-participants questionnaire has been delivered and analysed in this paper.

Those students who indicate that they are willing to be interviewed will be contacted and interviews will be held in person. The information from the questionnaire will be used as a basis for interview questions. The interview will be semi-structured and open ended, employing a heuristic approach (Moustakas, 1990)

Method of Analysis
The method of data analysis will follow the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Strauss and Corbin (1990) have defined grounded theory as:

... inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. (p 23)

The primary aim of research, using the grounded theory approach is to systematically discover a theory that fits the situation. This is achieved through comparative analysis. Grounded theory does not only use qualitative data but quantitative data to verify the theory being developed.

Discussion of Results of the Co-participant Questionnaire
Questionnaires were sent to the 26 co-participants, 18 were returned, although not all co-participants answered all questions. The return rate of questionnaires was 69 % making the sample representative.

Progress in the Course
The co-participants were approximately two-thirds way through the required six modules. Approximately one third of the co-participants had completed their dissertation. This indicates that co-participants

were well placed to comment on the course modules, but perhaps not so well placed to comment on the dissertation, since only one-third had completed it.

Rating of Modules
The foundation modules, comprising Understanding Learning and the

Learner, Understanding the Curriculum, Understanding Teachers and
Teaching, Understanding Teachers and Teaching, and Understanding
Educational Inquiry were generally rated good to very good. This
indicates that the co-participants thought the modules were effective
in overall design, educational effectiveness and were relevant. The
numbers of co-participants in the specialised modules were too low to
provide conclusive results, but these were still rated quite well. The
module notes were not adapted to suit the Singaporean context, however,
the assignments, tutorials and intensive study schools were adapted to
suit the local environment.

Course Outcomes
The results indicate that co-participants thought quite strongly that
they had increased their knowledge and skills in the areas of teaching
and learning. They also thought that they had increased or improved
their ability to think independently about education. However, the
co-participants thought that the course was less effective in
increasing their ability to share their ideas and work more effectively
with their colleagues, although there had been some improvements. In
addition, the co-participants thought that the course had helped them
to evaluating their own work.

Co-participants comment on the course outcomes:
Rejuvenates or rekindles interest in teaching.

In general, the co-participants thought that the course had increased
their knowledge and skills, so that they could do their job better.
There was fairly strong support that the presence of the on-site tutor
was significant in supporting and encouraging the co-participants
study. This was supported by comments made by co-participants in the
section on course delivery.

The co-participants seem divided over whether the Polytechnic supported
and encouraged their study to a significant extent. This is interesting
since the Polytechnic pays all course fees, employs an on-site tutor
and allows the co-participants to attend intensive study schools in
Polytechnic time. Perhaps this is because in the Singaporean context
this level of support is expected and has become the standard.

The major outcome the co-participants expected to gain from the course
was to learn more about education. This included learning more about
teaching and learning theories, understanding pedagogical issues,
thinking independently about education and curriculum and teaching
methods.

Co-participant response to the question on course expectations:

Acquire knowledge on theories of learning and support for my reflection
on the dynamics of interaction in the classroom.

Also, they thought they would be able to do their job better as a result of the course. The majority of the co-participants thought their course expectations were being met. The co-participants' responses to these series of questions indicate, in the co-participants opinion,

that the aims of the course are being met.

Course Delivery

The co-participants believed that being able to work at their own pace, having access to an on-site tutor, having access to other students on-site, the learning materials provided and the intensive study schools were helpful factors in the course. The co-participants were equally divided on whether help and advice from colleagues not studying the course was helpful with the course.

The only reason the co-participants did not attend the tutorials or intensive study school was because of teaching and meeting commitments.

The co-participants saw that the major role the of the on-site tutor was to assist them with assignments and the dissertation. Although some co-participants thought the personal touch and immediate feedback of the tutor was also important. The importance of the role of the on-site tutor is shown by these co-participant responses.

Extremely important. This is because I was able to have immediate feedback on doubts, queries and questions which I had in the course of my study.

Very important. I can consult them conveniently whenever there are queries. This expedites my learning process and I have managed to complete the course within two and half years with commendations.

The personal touch. I don't think it would be effective if it is all remote control. e.g. The discussion on assignments and feedback.

The on-site tutor had been particularly supportive and encouraging. His dedication and interest had been a motivation to me: a mother of four, pursing a M. Ed on top of my duties in my department.

It appears that the on-site tutor is not only supporting the academic needs of the co-participants, but he is also important in motivating and positively reinforcing the co-participants.

The co-participants found the tutorials and intensive seminars helpful as a practical workshop, for interactions with fellow students, enrichment for study and for discussions of course content. However, they thought they were less helpful as problem solving sessions for their assignment.

Possible Problems with the Course
The problems found by the co-participants with the course in order of
highest priority are:
ïfinding time to do the reading and assignments,
ïfinding time to attend the tutorial and intensive study schools,
ïthe reading level of the course is too high, the dissertation is
difficult to complete,
ïcontent of the course is irrelevant to their work,
ïcontacting the Sheffield course tutor,
ïassignments are difficult,
ïthe content of the course is difficult to understand.

The most significant problems with the course appears to be to finding
time to do the reading and assignments, attending the tutorials and
intensive study schools. This problem has been mention many times by
co-participants. Some of the co-participant found the assignments
problematical as indicated by the following comments.

Assignments are too long. 5000 words is not necessarily an indication
of research/enquiry. Some of us write very concisely.

Contents, discussions, issues of education are all interesting, but not
 the assignments.

What the Co-participants Liked about the Course
What the co-participants liked most about the course in order of
priority are:
ïthe self paced nature of the course, the presence of the on-site
tutor,
ïhigh content of critical analysis,
ïflexibility in assignment submission,
ïregular meetings between co-participants and the on-site tutor,
ïcontent of the course is relevant to your work,
ïrange of topics to choose from,
ïregular monitoring of your work by the course tutor,
ïcontent of the course is easy to understand,
ïthe course is linked to the Polytechnic's staff development
activities, the involvement of the Educational and Staff Development
Department,
ïcontent of the course is easy to understand,
ïworking as a group in the course.

Of these factors, the first four were chosen by significant numbers of
co-participants, greater than ten. This indicates that these factors
were significant in what they liked about the course.

This comment by a co-participant indicates what she liked about the
course.

Paper Presented at the Joint ERA/
AARE Conference, Singapore, 1996
Australian Association
for Research in Education

Broader view of things in education. Able to hold an educational
debate. Being more critical i.e. knowledgeable.

Improving the Course
The suggestions for improving the course were varied. The
co-participants major suggestions were that they would like more time
to complete their assignments, to be given more time off their teaching
duties, and better access to educational resources. This comment by a
co-participant indicates the importance of time release.

If only departments and personnel were to give us less teaching duties.

A majority of the co-participants indicated that they would recommend
the course to other colleagues. However, not all the co-participants
believed it was an easy course, as indicated by this comment.

Yes for learning about education issues, no for acquiring the diploma
 (easier to do a course-work engineering program), maybe if one has kids
 and other distractions.

The general comments indicated that the co-participants were satisfied
with the course as indicated by the following comments by
co-participants.

It is a real modular system very suitable for adult distance learning
programme.

Overall, the course enables me to understand better the area of
teaching/learning and curriculum and also helps me to think critically
about what we do.

The course requires course members to be independent and
self-motivating. It is good for post-graduates as such students have
the qualities mentioned above and they have an aim prior to enrolling
in the course.

Basically, it is a good course and I am proud of being able to attend
the course.

Once again, these comments are positive, indicating the course is
meeting the needs of the co-participants.

Conclusions
From analysis of the questionnaires it appears that the Sheffield
Master of Education is achieving its stated aims and the students are
very satisfied with the course. The critical factors which appear to
make the course so successful are:
ïlearning materials which are relevant and 'user friendly',

ïthe course is adapted to suit the local environment,
ïteaching skills and knowledge that are relevant,
ïthe availability of the Sheffield on-site tutor,
ïthe provision of tutorials and intensive study schools,
ïbeing able to interact with fellow students.

The main way this course could be improved is by allowing the students to have more time off their teaching duties to complete assignments and attend tutorials and intensive study schools. This of course, is out of control of Sheffield University. In addition, the co-participants believe that access to specialist books, journals and articles on education should be improved.

The role of the on-site tutor seems to be an important factor in the success of the course. The on-site tutor role seems to be similar to that of the Open University's tutor-counsellor. The role of the tutor counsellors are to prepare the students for independent learning by giving advice on study skills and how to approach the study of subject matter (Stewart, 1981). They provide support to the students throughout their academic careers and provide general educational advice which gives stability and continuity to the students (Clennell et al, 1988). The advantage for the students is that they have an authoritative figure to turn to in the traditional setting. This helps solve problems in their transition from their traditional mode of study to a more independent learner.

In a similar way the Sheffield on-site tutor prepares the co-participants for independent study and supports them throughout their course. The co-participants have someone, on-site, who can assist them with any problems they have with the course. Also, the on-site tutor provides the co-participants with motivation by commenting on their assignments and monitoring their progress. The co-participants have indicated this is of great help to them. The presence of the on-site tutor must be a major reason why the course is so successful.

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