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Improving Effectiveness, Academic Growth and Collegiality among Faculty

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that faculty at most institutions are becoming increasingly isolated, resulting in low effectiveness, academic dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to high faculty turnover. This case study presents two experiments conducted at an online institution to provide an inclusive, collegial and stimulating work environment to its globally dispersed and culturally diverse faculty. The initial findings suggest that on-call faculty can be induced to engage in organisational activities, thus feeling more connected and included in the team and progress of the institution. Efforts are required, though, on the part of the institution to provide faculty with opportunities to join in a connected dialog with each other and the broader university staff.

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Legendary pre-eminent academic institutions around the world demonstrate that success in an academic institution is largely dependent upon the quality of its faculty and the students they draw. Therefore, universities must attract and retain exemplary faculty. Fortunately, there is a considerable body of work on job satisfaction and retention of faculty. Manger and Eikeland (1990); Hagedorn (1994); Galaz-Fontes (2002) and Lacy and Sheehan (1997) explored these issues in diverse cultural settings including Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Israel, Mexico, Sweden, the UK, and the USA, and found that the university's atmosphere, a sense of community, and relationships with colleagues are the greatest predictors of job satisfaction.

A major binding force, which lures academicians to universities, is the academic learning and creative satisfaction they can enjoy and perceive as far more enriching than the material benefits that other organizations might proffer. For example, Patterson (1999) suggested global learning is particularly valued as it creates dialog with professional colleagues outside one's own institution and reaching out to colleagues internationally. This notion has been enriched by work in the past decade

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on building communities of scholars and learners (Mavin and Cavaleri 2004; Pinchot 1998; Baker 1999). For example, a number of institutions built Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), which Miami University scholars define as a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group of six to fifteen members (eight to twelve members is the recommended size) who engage in an active, collaborative, year long program. The FLC discusses topics such as enhancing teaching and learning, and offers frequent seminars that provide development and community building (Cox, 1995 and 2004). Karpiak (1997) suggested that such communities promote a sense of organisational involvement among faculty and give them a feeling of being members of a stimulating and well networked team. Workshops and consulting can provide only surface or single-loop learning, yet an FLC offers deep, double-loop learning (careful reflection on actions, outcomes and social structures) (Argyris, 1993). Miami University (Cox, 2001), Virginia Tech (Wildman et al., 2000), San Jose State University (Harper, 1996), Iowa State University, Texas A&M and the University of Wisconsin-Madison created and supported a “community” of instructors who meet fairly regularly to discuss a specific “domain”. FLCs thus provide a forum for meeting colleagues, participating in peer-to-peer co-learning activities, sharing “best practices,” and being catalysts for new ideas and projects (Wenger and Snyder 2000). Online FLCs can be more effective than face-to-face settings by virtue of being more pervasive, more sustainable, better connected, highly visible, and well documented (Palloff and Pratt 1999; Sherer et al., 2003).

There is clearly a need to draw upon the wealth of knowledge and experience of academic colleagues in a university learning organisation. Yet many universities barely resemble learning organisations at all (White and Weathersby, 2005), and rekindling the spirit takes real effort (Bowman, 2002). The existing literature indicates the dire need for experimentation to find better ways to improve effectiveness, academic growth and collegiality among faculty.

THE CONTEXT

a. The Genesis of Universitas 21 Global

Universitas 21 was founded at the University of Melbourne in 1997 as an international network of leading research-intensive universities to foster collaboration among its members and seize diverse opportunities that no single institution would be able to realize. At the second annual meeting in 1998, 10 foundational projects were identified including cooperation in e-learning and internal U21 quality assurance (Teather, 2004). In 2001, these initiatives led to the creation of Universitas 21 Global (U21Global), the online learning group, and U21 Pedagogica, the U21 quality assurance body. U21 leaders felt that e-learning was a globe girdling activity and could liberate U21 universities from the spatial constraints of their physical campuses giving them global reach. It was also clear that online learning required substantial resources beyond those of any single university. Indeed, the collective resources of U21 universities were inadequate to build an online institution. A private sector partner (Thomson Learning) was brought in as a 50% owner of the Universitas 21 Global Pte Ltd online learning joint venture.

b. The Issue: Creating and Sustaining an Inclusionary Collegial Global Faculty Cadre

All good universities today face a challenge in attracting and retaining strong faculty. This challenge is significantly greater for an online university like U21Global, making it imperative for U21Global to find, attract, and retain talented faculty with a passion for online teaching and research. These are prime elements addressing faculty well-being.

U21Global has experienced very rapid growth. In just under 4 years it has attracted over 3000 students from more than 60 countries. This growth and geographic diversity had to be complemented with commensurate growth and geographic diversity in faculty. U21Global has over 100 faculty members across the globe. A majority of these faculty members are full-time faculty members at universities world-wide and work as on-call faculty for U21Global.

Increasing the size of the faculty cadre while maintaining diversity and creating a sense of community, is critical to meet the learning needs of the global student body at U21Global. This is in line with its stated commitment to provide students with a truly global learning environment. Its interest in attending to faculty well-being is two-fold. For a high quality online institution, recruiting high quality online professors is imperative. Moreover, the right individual to facilitate learning, by being a guide and mentor in the online environment, demands a different set of skills and sensitivities compared to the traditional face-to-face teacher. Second, similar to traditional universities, U21Global is conscious of budget constraints that limit the size of the faculty cohort. Hiring from a faculty pool (“adjuncts” in common parlance) not only gives the flexibility to fill a teaching appointment when needed (a just-in-time approach to hiring faculty), but reduces overhead costs. There are times when the need for faculty is high and the pool of quality faculty can get used up rather quickly. Thus, it is in the interest of U21Global to establish and maintain a circle of so-called ‘quality faculty’ or ‘star faculty’ by focusing on the improvement of their quality of life as an on-call status employee.

Paralleling these faculty retention and expansion needs is the need to increase the strength of full-time faculty managers which has been particularly difficult, prompting a change in strategy and structure for recruiting, retaining and organising faculty managers. Faculty managers are responsible for overall supervision of the courses U21Global offers and for mentoring and guiding on-call faculty during their teaching appointments. Faculty managers are supported in their supervisory and mentoring efforts by programme executives who handle day-to-day details of each course section. In addition, U21Global has created a Faculty Learning Community (FLC) where faculty managers and faculty share their experiences. The relatively small size of the faculty managers means that U21Global must attract and retain excellent faculty manager colleagues. Simultaneously, it faces similar challenges with faculty along with having to integrate both geographically dispersed faculty groups to build an integrated faculty community.

These parallel and linked challenges of identifying, attracting, and retaining faculty managers and faculty required U21Global to rethink how it organises, communicates with and integrates faculty. This paper reports on two sets of experiments at U21Global to achieve these goals.

TWO PARALLEL EXPERIMENTS: CREATING FLEXIBLE WORKING CONDITIONS AND A CONNECTED FACULTY COMMUNITY

Two parallel experiments were conducted. Experiment One focused on creating flexible working conditions for faculty managers and faculty. It is rooted in restructuring the roles and locations of faculty managers and assessing the willingness of faculty to be more deeply involved in various U21Global activities much beyond the conventional role of “adjuncts” in other universities. The methodology in this experiment is primarily quantitative using structured surveys of faculty managers and faculty. Experiment Two applied a qualitative method and focused upon creating a connected faculty community by involving a small faculty group in continual dialogue. A moderator led this group using diverse online tools. A collective case study was conducted (Stake, 1995), concluded by a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 1998).

a. Experiment One: Creating Flexible Working Conditions

U21Global is headquartered in Singapore. Initially, faculty managers were based only there. The cost of relocation and ex-patriot compensation and benefits were very high. Growth in student enrolment, difficulty in attracting new faculty managers, and related work pressures took a toll on this handful of faculty managers. Therefore, the initial Singapore-based faculty manager model needed rethinking. Accordingly, U21Global created a new faculty hiring and organisation model with a two-pronged strategy. First, it tried to find suitably qualified talented faculty managers primarily in developing nations and base them in their own countries. It adopted a policy of faculty remuneration based upon their country of location. This approach complemented its online and virtual institution model. It also gave the option to the faculty managers hired through this approach to operate from their homes. In order to give flexibility to its Singapore-based faculty managers, it introduced optional flexi-working hours. Secondly, it involved the 100+ faculty more closely in the activities of U21Global as a way to blur the line between core and on-call faculty. Adjuncts were brought together in online Faculty Learning Community (FLC) forums to encourage their involvement in such diverse activities as: sitting on Faculty Committees; offering online research “Webinars” to faculty, staff and students; doing joint research; being active in the online Faculty Learning Community; supporting and advancing the online Faculty Development Program; and generally sharing their online pedagogical experiences with all faculty colleagues and students.

The rationale behind the new hiring approach was to expand faculty numbers while keeping costs in check. Flexi-working hours and the option to work from home were added incentives. The second approach of encouraging on-call faculty to partake in the mainstream activities of U21Global is a novel attempt to demonstrate that in an online environment part-time faculty can contribute equally to the organization and be integral part of the organizational structure and activities.

Methodology of Experiment One

Under this approach, U21Global successfully hired two faculty managers in India and one in the USA. Two of them were allowed to work from their homes in their respective countries, while the third faculty manager was provided a room in the campus of one of U21Global's partner institutions. Despite the cost savings there were concerns that working from home/ alone in an office may be isolating and impede effective links with colleagues, diminishing productivity and collegiality. Several months later, under this experiment, the faculty managers were surveyed through a structured non-disguised survey instrument. All 16 faculty managers were invited to participate. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the FLC intervention with the faculty, the researchers conducted another online structured non-disguised survey to learn about the benefit of the FLC and about the ways in which faculty would like to involve themselves in various U21Global activities. Surveys were sent to 92 faculty members. In both the online surveys, respondents were given the option of being anonymous to encourage candid responses.

b. Experiment Two: Building a Connected Faculty Learning Community

Connected communication is being used for on-call faculty to build a strong cadre of online faculty who become an integral part of the U21Global team, as if they were full-time employees. Connected communication is a strategy that focuses on improving faculty quality of life by strengthening their sense of belonging and not isolating them from the rest of the institution. This endeavour allows all employees, regardless of geographic location, to connect with one another and focuses on keeping all communities connected to the organisation core. Further, it assists in clearly and consistently communicating to the team while simultaneously inviting valuable feedback. Connected communication allows everyone to be a communicator, thus presenting a global perspective of innovations and views, and making the faculty a part of the integrated whole living system.

Methodology of Experiment Two

Experiment Two is a qualitative case analysis. Participants were on-call faculty meeting asynchronously and virtually in a discussion board and during a monthly Skype conference call. Data were gathered from multiple sources to include observations and documents (such as discussion board postings, emails, and notes taken during and after Skype meetings). The data enabled themes to emerge and allowed the researchers to make assertions about the case study as did Stake (1995).

Setting of Experiment Two

Five on-call faculty of high quality were selected and details inviting them to join the study were emailed. Once confirmation was received from four out of the five invitees, information about the "connected communication" discussion board as well as Skype was emailed to the group.

One of the researchers acted as a participant and observer in this study. A discussion board named "connected communication" included the following topics for open discussion: Introduction; What is new at U21Global?; Best Practices; Technology;

Research; Training; Webinar Topics; and a Social Café. This approach allowed the globally dispersed participants to engage in dialogue asynchronously as a part of the U21Global team. No time limits were set concerning the amount of time to be spent online, nor were criteria set relating to the minimum amount of posts.

Monthly Skype phone conferences were held where items from the discussion board were discussed further, or new ideas were brought forth. Skype meetings lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The moderator (researcher) engaged in discussion boards and Skype conversations.

THE FINDINGS

a. Initial Findings in Experiment One

Survey of Faculty Managers

Hiring faculty managers in developing nations and letting them operate from their homes is proving to be worthwhile not only because of its low cost, but also because these faculty managers can readily attend to the needs of U21Global's growing corporate clients and students in these nations. Many of these clients require a hybrid approach of face-to-face teaching combined with online and the faculty managers based there are of great help.

Fourteen out of the sixteen faculty managers responded to the survey. The survey revealed that the new hires were quite comfortable working from home and did not face any problem of isolation. Faculty managers based in India and the US were well connected with each other and their Singapore colleagues through such tools as Skype video conferencing, instant messenger chat tools, Interwise/ Elluminate faculty meetings, webinars, faculty blogs, project group hub, emails, teleconferences, etc. Their performance appraisals also revealed high output in teaching, research and administrative assignments. Half of the core faculty felt that the work load at U21Global is extremely high. This was an expected response due to the varied academic/ administrative responsibilities assigned to them during this phase of rapid growth. Half of the respondents also agreed that the compensation package and other benefits at U21Global are good. However, some respondents noted the remuneration is not comparable to that at companies and the work-life imbalance is making the package less attractive. The faculty managers appeared almost evenly divided on the five-point scale on the issue of work environment at U21Global being conducive to research and other creative activities. Subjective comments on this issue were equally diverse. Some faculty managers deemed the encouragement from the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and Chair, Research Committee as key motivators, while others saw the range of work, work demands and continual disruptions meant time for research and attitudes relating to research are not conducive to good research.

The faculty managers were almost unanimous that the working from home option is a positive step toward better productivity and creativity. Some observed this initiative is natural for a global online university like U21Global. Consensus also emerged on the benefits of this initiative:

- Saves travel time to work (which can be used for performing value-adding academic tasks)
- Offers a more reflective work environment with fewer distractions than conventional offices
- Results in office space and infrastructure savings (notably in land-scarce Singapore)

The favourable response to working from home was echoed in responses from Singapore-based faculty managers. Half the faculty managers saw flexi-working hours needed further fine-tuning.

The faculty managers were almost unanimous that new faculty hired in India should be allowed to operate from their place of origin and their home to save relocation costs. While agreeing that this is a desirable option, one respondent noted that (s)he would suggest a 3 to 6 month attachment of the new hires to one of the U21Global Indian (recruitment) offices, for orientation and integration into U21Global. Once this is completed, new faculty could then work from anywhere.

The employee well-being initiatives at U21Global received a major boost with a solid majority (almost 80%) of the core faculty agreeing that, “Overall, the work environment at U21Global is extremely good”, with nobody disagreeing/ strongly disagreeing to it. One comment aptly reflected the work ethos at U21Global as “Entrepreneurial, positive, and challenging”.

Survey of On-call Faculty

52 of the 92 on-call faculty members (56.5%) responded to the online survey. A majority was open to getting deeply involved in U21Global activities, beyond the traditional adjunct faculty role:

- 63.5% agreed/ strongly agreed that given an opportunity, they would like to become a member of some faculty committees
- 73.1 % are willing to get more involved in curriculum and courseware development
- 61.5% indicated they would be interested in occasionally giving real-time interactive “Webinars” to U21Global students, faculty and staff on any area of their expertise
- 59.7% noted they would be interested in occasionally being interviewed for a “Podcast” to U21Global students, faculty and staff on any area of their expertise
- 52% said that they would be interested in occasionally writing a brief note on some recent activities for a quarterly issue of GLOBAL (the U21Global in-house newsletter)
- 41.2% would help revise the online Faculty Development Programme (FDP)
- 52% are willing to be a faculty member for a future FDP

- 75% would like to be engage in joint research initiatives with U21Global faculty managers
- 78.9% wanted to be involved as an online faculty member in some of the growing corporate and government programmes that U21Global is offering or planning for the next year
- 78.8% want to be considered for a face-to-face corporate programme that U21Global is conducting in Asia, though some American faculty saw travel a constraint here
- 71.2% liked the idea of actively participating in the online FLC to share online pedagogical experiences and listen to those of faculty colleagues
- 55.8% felt it would be better if FLC activities are organized as Internet blogs or wikis rather than real-time discussions through Interwise/Elluminate
- An overwhelming 92.3% said they enjoyed their interactions with U21Global students, faculty and staff
- 90.2% agreed/strongly agreed that their links and experiences with U21Global would help them advance online pedagogy at their university/ institution and elsewhere to benefit all
- Faculty expressed interest in research positions in Singapore during sabbaticals to do joint research on online teaching, and initiate joint research with faculty managers

It is noteworthy that a majority of respondents indicated that they had not participated in the FLC initiatives at U21Global. The initial FLC efforts probably did not bring expected results because they were aimed at bringing the entire 100 odd faculty on a single FLC platform (discussion board/ Interwise meetings). This is indicative of the need for further experimentation with the FLC format and Experiment Two's "connected communication FLC" was a natural step forward.

b. Initial Findings in Experiment Two

Chronology of Events

Four geographically dispersed faculty members were observed during this mini-study. The observation took place in a virtual setting for a period of 9 weeks. The events and activities (observed) examined were conversations and communication via "skypersations," emails, and a discussion board specifically created for this study. The Gatekeeper (one of the researchers) proposed a skypersation date to all participants via email. Participants were informed of the established "Connected Communication" discussion board during the first skypersation and via email. This particular discussion board covered eight discussion topics (Table 1). Participants were asked to post their ideas to each of the topics; to read each other's posts and to engage in conversation with each other (similar to what their students do in virtual classes). Throughout the

observation period, the Gatekeeper emailed individual or group emails to all, and made several posts on the discussion board as well.

Multiple Sources of Data

Skypersation

Two skype calls were scheduled during the observation period. The first call lasted for one hour and all four participants were present. After the researcher (also a participant and observer) explained the study, the participants' initial reactions were very positive. The participants were enthusiastic and excited about having more personal links with U21Global. They asked for frequent skypersations, possibly monthly rather than the quarterly skype calls recommended by the researcher. Everyone left the call eager to participate in the discussion board.

The second call took place one month later. Participants realized that five different time zones posed a challenge in organising a synchronous meeting. Four colleagues missed this call and the researcher ended up speaking with one participant who had not posted to the discussion board, thus providing a wonderful opportunity to get valuable ideas during the call. The participant later posted his comments on the discussion board to engage in the discussion with others.

Connected Communication Discussion Board

The 'Connected Communication' discussion board consisted of 8 discussion topics as shown in Table 1. A total of 53 contributions (Table 1) were posted during the 9-week observation period as summarised in Table 2.

Table 1: Number of posts per Discussion topic

Discussion Topics	Number of Posts made
Introduction	1
What is new at U21G	10
Best Practices – Ideas	5
Technology	13
Training	2
Research Interests	7
Webinar Topics-Share your knowledge	0
Social Café	15
Total Posts	53

Table 2: Number of posting by participant

Participants	Number of Postings
Participant 1	19
Participant 2	15
Participant 3	2
Participant 4	7
Researcher	6

Emails

Email correspondence served the researchers to initially inform and invite participants to this study. Typical emails from the participants to the Gatekeeper included confirmation of receipt of emails sent and committing to post on the discussion board. A total of 39 emails were sent from the researcher to the participants, with 19 emails were sent by participants to the researcher.

Themes

After reading through the discussion board postings, the following themes emerged:

Seeking Commitment from U21Global

One participant remarked that a collegial atmosphere can only be created if U21Global moves away from making on-call faculty feel like outsourced sub-contractors, and is inclusionary for example by showing commitment in guaranteeing a number of courses to faculty each year and by providing advancement.

Research Interest

All participants expressed interest in participating in the multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and comparative research opportunities U21Global offers. They liked the idea of a dedicated discussion board topic to share and learn about diverse research interests, develop joint research possibilities, and explore funding opportunities.

Training

Participants wanted occasional re-training sessions on technology updates, or any advances in the online learning platform. Refresher training for those not teaching frequently was also seen as helpful.

Technology

Participants expressed frustration with the technology, and were eager for re-fresher training, while also applauding the excellence of the Tech Support Team at U21Global. Participants wanted to stay abreast about the future technology-related plans of U21Global.

Quality and Best Practices (of Assessment and Measurement thereof)

Some discussion posts discussed the evaluation pertaining to the quality of faculty assessments of discussion board and case assignments. Similarly, a question was raised regarding the validity of the assessment process considering the number of adjuncts teaching, and if we may want to consider an exit examination that evaluates student skills and knowledge gained during the course. Writing style and proper referencing were also mentioned.

Sharing of what works for them

Throughout diverse postings, adjuncts shared what works for them such as keeping track of quality discussion posts for grading purposes, or how to better engage non-participating students.

Thankful

Participants expressed gratitude for conducting this mini-study, setting up different communication sources, and having a facilitator present.

Evaluation

Participants greatly appreciated this inclusionary approach for faculty. The discussion topics related to Technology and Social Café on the Connected Communication discussion board had the majority of posts. After analyzing content from discussion board postings, rich themes presented themselves, such as taking their interest in conducting research and questions of funding back to the U21Global Research Committee, or advising Human Resources and the Pedagogy and Assessment Committee about receiving regular teaching assignments.

Overall, participants appeared to be very comfortable with each other. In the Social Café discussion topic, two participants (the ones without full-time appointments during the time of this study) really engaged with each other on topics more personal in nature (the type of pets they have, for example). Further, social networking or socializing was greatly enhanced by Connected Communication. The study shows participants enjoy communicating about work and social issues, creating a feeling of belonging and really getting to know their colleagues.

This experiment was a success, however, in large part because the researcher was also a participant linking with the participants via email and postings on the discussion board. It appears, for a Connected Community to remain a true success in long-term, a part-time or possibly even a full-time position has to be designated to engage with adjuncts regularly.

Basically, it takes active and authentic leadership to maintain a strong, growing, and ongoing Connected Communication community of geographically dispersed faculty. The results suggest that participants want and seek frequent contact with U21Global. They like knowing someone is out there to approach, who is interested in their ideas and is willing to respond to their concerns.

CONCLUSION AND GENERALISATION OF THE RESULTS IN THIS STUDY

a. Conclusion

The two experiments in this study helped U21Global to explore the possibility of establishing sustainable online dialog between its geographically dispersed and culturally diverse faculty and faculty managers, the same way they interact with their students. Both experiments yielded useful information from the participants about the possible extent and scope of their involvement in various U21Global activities, much beyond the role of “adjuncts” in a traditional university setting. Experiment One reported the success of the new approach to hiring and locating the faculty managers in different parts of the world, while providing the work-from-home option/ flexi-working hours. It also highlighted the willingness on part of on-call faculty to actively participate in the mainstream activities of U21Global. It validated the need for further experimentation with the existing FLC at U21Global, where faculty participation was very low. Experiment Two showed that it may take a Connected Communication facilitator to increase inclusion of on-call faculty to the extent where they feel they are authentic parts of the team. It echoed the findings of the Experiment One that the on-

call faculty appreciate this inclusionary approach for faculty and seek frequent contact with U21Global.

In sum, U21Global has realized that in this era of globalisation, it must recruit the best faculty globally to meet its pedagogical and research needs while creating sustainable initiatives that help keep faculty connected and included, while creating and maintaining valued synergies among its dispersed faculty groups. It was hypothesized, and subsequently supported that collaboration and connected communication are key success factors in sustaining feelings of inclusion and well being among on-call faculty.

b. Generalisations and Utility for Other Institutions More Broadly

Universities all over the world are facing imminent challenge to find, attract and retain quality faculty. The networked world today has opened limitless and boundary-less opportunities to explore talent in any part of the globe rather than following a local approach to faculty recruitment. For traditional brick 'n' mortar institutions, it is becoming increasingly feasible to look for faculty resources in any corner of the world and utilize their services on an ad hoc basis according to their unique requirements. The expensive approach to hiring such faculty full-time and bringing them permanently to a university campus can be avoided as has been shown here. However, it is imperative that such faculty are included in the culture and ethos of the institution just like the core faculty cohort. The connected communication approach suggested in this study would be equally useful to the conventional institutions for improving effectiveness, academic growth and collegiality amongst their entire faculty cohort some of whom may not be located at the same location.

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U21Global is the world's pre-eminent online graduate school, designed to meet the needs of individuals and corporations in the 21st century. It is a joint venture between Universitas 21, an international network of distinguished research-led universities, and Thomson Learning, a worldwide provider of tailored learning solutions for businesses and institutions.

More details about U21Global can be found at www.u21global.edu.sg

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