

**PARTNERSHIP for INSTITUTIONAL and PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**A Masters Programme in Mexico**  
*Tony Wright, Kora Basich and Jorge Aguilar*

**Introduction**

Attempting to achieve both institutional and professional development goals by taking a postgraduate degree may appear, on the surface of it, to be combining three quite disparate agendas. In the first place, collective institutional and individuals' professional goals typically work against each other, as individual members of a teaching community seek personal advancement, while the institution they work in wishes them to achieve particular institutional goals. In addition, a formal postgraduate course itself has to meet its own institutional criteria and quality standards. This paper tells the story of a Masters (MEd/BPhilEd – Teacher Training for English Language Teaching [TTELT]) programme run in partnership with a consortium of State Universities in Northwest Mexico between 1997 and 2000. Drawing on the personal accounts of two members of the cohort, and the Course Leader, it outlines the origins of the project and discusses the contribution of the experience to the development of both individual and institutional learning.

**Background**

The genesis of the MEd/BPhilEd (TTELT) programme can be traced back to the positive impact of the first BPhilEd (English Language Teaching) programme for ELT staff of the North Western universities run by Marjon between 1992 and 1995 (Salisbury 1995). This highly successful programme awakened in many individual participants the desire to study to a higher level. It also prompted those in management positions in the Language Departments (Escuelas de Lenguas) of the Universities to further develop and consolidate the work of their Language Schools.

Discussions between staff of the institutions in Mexico and Marjon during 1996 and 1997 led to the establishment of the MEd/BPhilEd TELT. It was agreed that a teacher education focus was appropriate for the participants of the new programme, with optional components on Management and Materials Writing for ELT. (The programme outline and chronology appears in Appendix I.) It was thus explicit from the outset that the programme would aim to develop a cadre of teachers capable of initiating and managing teacher training and professional development activity at their respective universities. In addition they would be able to undertake key professional leadership roles within their institutions.

The MEd/BPhilEd (TTELT) programme had been specially developed at Marjon for just these purposes. Unlike many Masters programmes offered by UK institutions, the TTELT and its descendants are grounded in the notion of professional development for participants, equipping them to undertake the types of role referred to above. Thus, rather than the starting point of the programme only being the syllabus of the TTELT, it was axiomatic that the course works on participants' knowledge and skills development appropriately for their working contexts, in this case, Mexico. Other TELT programmes had been successfully run in Namibia and Hungary prior to the Mexican one, and there was thus a residue of departmental experience to draw upon for the new programme.

**Partnership – Management of the Programme (Kora Basich)**

The first stage in the development of the programme was the enhancement and restatement of our partnership with the North-Western universities. Kora Basich, Director of the School of Languages and our local programme coordinator, of Universidad Autónoma

de Baja California (UABC) tells how the partnership developed. It is a story of how successful partnerships are grounded in histories of cooperation, shared perceptions of learning together and notions of the educational process. Her account emphasises the role of the host institutions in developing local administrative procedures and a shared goal in further training.

*There are times when a certain number of circumstances coincide and bring about positive results. This is what happened with the M Ed TTELT offered to the North-Western Mexican universities from 1997. Firstly, there was a keen interest from several of the participants of the first BPhilEd ELT group to continue with graduate studies. Secondly, their universities had few graduate level staff members in the area of language teaching. Thirdly, the Mexican Secretariat of Education (SEP) had established higher standards for the academic personnel; consequently their universities needed to promote professional development. Fourthly, several of the BPhilEd graduates were now in management positions; this allowed them to make proposals to their universities for graduate studies. Finally, but very significant for the programme was the fact that the relationship with the tutors back at Marjon had continued after the BPhilEd. This made it possible for us to make an unofficial proposal first and then begin the negotiations with the host university.*

*UABC had been the host university for the B Phil Ed ELT, and it had proved both to Marjon and the other regional universities that it had the organisational skills to service a Masters programme. The first stage of the process was the Rector of UABC requesting support for a group of Language School teachers to continue their graduate studies with Marjon. He subsequently persuaded the Rectors from the other regional universities to support their own staff in a similar way. This provided a positive start to the project, but from the beginning it was different from the B Phil Ed project. Because the universities were to their staff financially they did not have enough resources to cover any administrative fees for the British Council, as had been the case for the BPhilEd. Accordingly, UABC assumed complete administrative responsibility for this project, a major step for a Mexican university at that time.*

*UABC's previous experience with Marjon helped to make sure that every detail of the organisation was taken care of. The UABC thus agreed to become the host university and hold the summer sessions in the Ensenada campus which provided cool weather, and the Mexicali campus in the winter. Not only were classrooms and computer labs provided, but also photocopying services for all participants, and transportation to and from campus. Each university took care of accommodation and travelling expenses for their own teachers, and Marjon tutors were offered accommodation and expenses by UABC.*

*Another fortunate situation occurred in 1997 when the Overseas Development Agency (ODA), later Department for International Development (DFID) began to gather information in order to produce an impact studies project of the projects they had financed in Mexico during the 1990s. In our particular case this would bring evidence of how the BPhilEd graduates had influenced their institutions. The data showed how graduates of the BPhilEd programme had launched a series of local projects and links with other educational institutions, different educational sectors, which had developed academic programmes in the disciplinary field and prepared the teachers to become educational leaders who showed a keen interest in continuing with their professional development.*

*By the time the DFID visited Mexico to conduct the survey the BPhilEd participants had already started the TTELT with Marjon. DFID organised a reunion which coincided with the beginning of the first module of the Masters. Not only were some of the course participants invited, but the Marjon tutors present were also invited as guests. This was a fortunate*

*situation because the DFID officer who presided over the meeting became aware of the limited financial support the MEd programme had and agreed to support it by granting £5,000 for books, which the universities were unable to provide.*

*There were also some peculiarities of this project that made it particularly successful. For example, of the 19 participants on the programme, 11 had also taken the first B Phil Ed programme. Thus, the proportion of trainees that had worked together and knew how to study and collaborate with each other was large: there was a culture of study. The rest of the group just blended in with this culture. The spirit of collaboration was greatly promoted by the tutors, who from the beginning stressed reflective and collaborative practices. Additionally, the profile of these new participants was varied and very rich in experience. Several were Heads of Department or coordinators, and all had been teaching and teacher training for a long time. The experience in the group thus ranged from curriculum design and teacher training, to materials writing and administration. The course culture proved to be a major factor in the successful transfer of knowledge and skills to participants' home universities.*

### **The Programme – Tuning To Context**

In terms of teaching the postgraduate degree programme, Marjon tutors were faced with the task of 'tuning' an existing validated degree programme to the specific needs of a group of individuals and institutions who would follow the course in twice-yearly short intensive modules over two years, with assignments in between the modules, followed by a dissertation written at distance with Marjon and local tutorial support. (An outline of the course appears in Appendix II) The anodyne descriptions of course components had to be brought to life and given professional relevance for the course participants, and assignments had to be set which made professional sense within the participants' working contexts as well as meeting academic requirements.

A set of working principles guided these challenging tasks, and the subsequent teaching of the programme. The principles have evolved out of the experience of running Masters level programmes at Marjon over many years. How they were activated in the programme is described in the following section.

### **Professional Learning – the Participant's Perspective**

In this section, Jorge Aguilar, a participating teacher from Universidad Autonoma de Sinaloa – Culiacan Campus - describes how he engaged with the working principles behind the programme. Each working principle is stated, and Jorge's account of his experience and learning follows.

*Being part of the MEd group was certainly a worthwhile experience that helped me develop a different understanding of professional learning and institutional and curriculum development and how professional and institutional growth can be brought about.*

#### **1. Our experience, past and present, is an important starting point for professional learning and development.**

*There is no doubt that previous experience provides a platform for professional growth and learning. Such a platform should be seen as the point of departure for teacher education programmes. On the MEd, our experiential knowledge acted as a filter through which we*

*made sense of new knowledge and learning experiences that led to new understandings. Our prior experience, together with our pre-existing beliefs, assumptions and values, were shared and analysed, enabling us to perceive educational, learning and training issues in new ways.*

*A good example is that that we, the MEd participants, were from different institutions with varied degrees of experience in teaching, training and school and department management. This enriched the learning experience of the modules, where new and shared knowledge were related to our previous experience.*

## **2. We can learn from our peers and colleagues, given a collaborative working environment.**

*We teachers, as part of educational systems at different levels, have consciously or unconsciously absorbed and built up a 'baggage' of knowledge, insights and experiences that have indeed shaped how we perceive our personal, academic and professional worlds. This 'baggage' should be valued and acknowledged, but above all it should be shared and exploited in teacher education courses. Knowledge solely derived from professional literature and from the tutors does not suffice. In the MEd, we saw that knowledge from peers and colleagues complemented established sources of knowledge in significant ways.*

*Working together was a fruitful opportunity to become aware of our own points of view, our ideas, and our reflections. All of this out-there experiential content was all valuable knowledge you never find in books or get from tutors. Of course, this would have never been possible if our tutors had not given us the opportunity to collaborate in a variety of ways. Working in this way provided us with the opportunity to develop new ideas, to gain new insights, to clarify doubts, to see the incongruence of our thoughts and so on. We soon realised that working with others was synonymous with ideas creation and clarification. Collective thought and practice led to understanding and learning that supported a robust evolution of our professional development and thus of our institutions.*

*Working collaboratively was not an easy task; in fact, I personally had to develop skills for working in groups, in listening to others as well as in being more tolerant and considerate. I particularly liked the way our tutors exploited during the taught modules and through the assignments, collaboratively-produced ideas and knowledge to make us look at factors that play an important role in teacher education processes as well as in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of educational programmes and projects. An example of this was the collaborative course design assignment.*

## **3. Relationships between practice and theory are complex and need to be considered as a central aspect of professional development. By doing this, we can develop our thinking on professional issues.**

*Attempting to theorise practice and to make practical sense of theoretical precepts is a challenging task, particularly if one comes from an educational system mainly based on knowledge transmission, like Mexico. I remember reading chapters and articles before the MEd course that made general sense, but it was hard to picture their practical applications. On the MEd we were often encouraged to develop a critical stance and to question the*

*validity of public theories and to build up our private principles, always bearing in mind our the factors that make up our educational contexts. By trying to make sense of theories and by trying to explain and describe our practice during the course, our professional thinking and philosophy helped us define that way we thought of our main tasks as language and teachers educators. Writing assignments played a key role in helping us figure out the relationship between theory and practice, and putting public theory into perspective. This process involved being able to describe and defend our practical and contextual know-how in terms of the principles behind our instructional processes and reasoning, or 'theorising our practice'.*

#### **4. Learning involves many processes: we need to learn more about learning, and to become better learners.**

*In Mexico, as elsewhere, we educators are more concerned about teaching or encouraging learning but often disregard our ongoing learning. During the MEd, we had plenty of opportunities to consider ways in which we could learn how to learn. I soon realised that learning is learnable and that successful learning – real understanding - depends more on consciously thinking about how we can go about learning to tackle the issues in our contexts than memorizing and subsequently verbalizing content.*

*On the course, we were encouraged to develop a variety of learning skills such as the ability to deal with the unexpected, to make informed choices, to develop sharp observational skills, to construct meaningful knowledge in one's interaction with our institutional, personal and professional worlds, while guided by our principles, values, convictions and reasons. In short, we were one way or the other taught how to develop skills in learning to learn, learning to be, learning to feel, learning to do and learning to think. This is what I appreciate the most of the MEd.*

#### **5. Inquiry is a central means of learning and professional development.**

*I hold that to become real agents of change, we, as educators, should keep on the verge of finding fresh ways to understand and conceptualise language and teacher education. How can one keep on learning, defining, redefining and energizing their professional art and craft? How can one maintain motivation and become more aware of what takes place inside and outside the classroom, the training room and in the wider context? The answer is working on the development of an inquisitive mind and probing attitude in addition to the development of research skills through which a number of issues can be explored and answers to a wide range of questions can be generated and responded to. Research also provides the opportunity to refresh and invigorate our jobs and our professional field. Unquestionably, an inquiring standpoint leads to a better understanding of what happens in our immediate and broader educational contexts and diminishes the possibilities of career boredom and burnout.*

*For example, assignments and tasks in the MEd were mainly research-based which helped us become aware of the importance of uncovering issues which are otherwise hard to see in our everyday practice. The roles and tasks that we, as teacher researchers, undertook in the different research stages allowed us to explore new territories and to take on new responsibilities that provoked new understandings and conceptions regarding language and teacher education. The course provided us with the chance to discover and learn how*

*to value and give meaning to students', teachers' and our own actions, comments and expressed views, and this led to stimulating and productive learning experiences.*

## **6. New knowledge, skills and awareness are major goals of professional development.**

*Any educational programme should aim at involving learners in acquiring knowledge, developing skills and most importantly in raising awareness. I strongly contend that knowledge and skills are useless unless they are accompanied by a high level of awareness of their applications and purposes as well as their immediate and wider educational contexts of use. Lack of awareness can only lead to disorganised and aimless educational attempts to improve the quality of language and teacher education programmes.*

*Being part of the MEd made me realise that knowledge is not a static system but an adaptive one that is always adjusting to the new circumstances in our professional field as well as in our local contexts. I still remember our tutors helping us become familiar with this feature of knowledge by providing us with the chance to critically reflect upon the purposes, practical implications and the situations in which modified and newly acquired knowledge and skills could be applied. Making us see those dimensions assisted in the development of analytical awareness, but above all, it helped us to assess and look at old, modified and new knowledge from various angles.*

*The MEd also helped us in the development of another type of awareness: personal and professional awareness. This was facilitated by bringing out into the surface our belief systems helping us actually see our values, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs and the ways in which these influence our perceptions and interpretation of our personal and professional world. It helped us become aware of our roles as teachers and teacher educators and as agents of change in our institutions. I was encouraged on the course to develop a high level of awareness, which I see as fundamental for effective agents of change in our educational context.*

## **7. Change is a basic element of learning and development and can be worked on at different levels - personal, professional and institutional**

*Change in education has to be faced. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling behind, or falling into decay. Education does not deserve that. Educators in many parts of the world have, for example, shown a real interest in improving the quality of education by making it more progressive, human and learner-centred. In education, changes occur mainly in the personal, professional and institutional domains. I still remember one session in the MEd in which the nature of change was discussed. It was then that I became aware of the interrelatedness of these three domains, and how changes, like it or not, affect the person, the professional and the institution.*

*The MEd sensitized me to understand that if we wish change our person we, as educators, should work on the ongoing assessment of our personal lives: what we do, what we believe, what we think and what we feel and how these influence our professional and institutional performance. After all, we teach what and who we are. I am now more*

*convinced that ever that professional and institutional success relies more on being aware of and working on our values, attitudes, emotions and actions. On the other hand, we should observe our professional performance in an ongoing basis by monitoring and assessing our knowledge, skills and professional roles and by linking our professional realm to our personal, institutional and learning worlds.*

**8. While self-development and increased autonomy are important professional goals, professional learning is, above all, a social activity.**

*As a result of the MEd, I contend that professional and institutional learning and improvement is dependent on building up opportunities for individuals to come together for a variety of purposes. It is a truism that learning is individual, that every person makes sense of the world in their own ways. It cannot, however, be likened to learning in isolation, where the only source of knowledge and experience are individuals themselves. We understand our personal and professional worlds better when collaborating with peers in groups. In other words, we learn through social activity in which dialogue plays an important role.*

*Working together was a constant in the MEd and conducive to sharing experiences and generating and exploring ideas and knowledge. Our tutors provided a good number of opportunities for us to talk about and disclose goals and delve into our beliefs and assumptions. Through these social and dialogical tasks, we stated opinions, which were often hard to express in public at times; our knowledge, skills, and attitudes were reinforced or changed; questions were posed and answered; and problems and possible solutions discussed. It was through social engagement that we learned a great deal from others and ourselves in addition to being able to make sense of public and our private theories. In short, educators can limit their learning if they are isolated from their peers and other practitioners and miss valuable opportunities to be involved in social and professional engagement.*

*As a result of engaging with the course I feel I have gained the following:*

- ◆ *A broader understanding of language and teacher education as well as institutional development*
- ◆ *Awareness of who I am and my belief systems*
- ◆ *A new focus on learning and the learners*
- ◆ *New expertise in ELT and teacher education curriculum design and management*
- ◆ *A new vision in relation to project development, management and evaluation*
- ◆ *Awareness of the importance of curriculum and program management and evaluation*
- ◆ *A broader perception of the factors that affect educational practices including academic, political and evaluative issues*

*All these have enabled me to engage productively in the development of ELT and educational practice in my home state of Sinaloa.*

## **What Have We Learned?**

This section draws on the reflections of Tony Wright and Jorge Aguilar.

What we seem to have learned collectively from the MEd experience is that:

- Inter-institutional collaboration within specific regions that brings practitioners with varied experience and expertise together deserves to be promoted and could lead to more robust institutional and professional development.
- Institutional and individual needs and interests may best be aligned where the two are significantly benefited; that is, the institution involves the individual in educational programmes and development projects that assist in their ongoing growth and the individual excels to help the institution move forward to improve the quality of education.
- Institutions can forge partnerships to share experience and expertise to establish liaison projects in programme and course development as well as materials design and programme evaluation.
- A close relationship between course leaders and tutors and participants is beneficial, where the course leader and tutors know who the participants are; their strengths, weaknesses, goals and interests, and personal and professional background as well.
- Research is a prerequisite for professional and institutional development. This entails both fundamental and practitioner-led activity.
- Teacher education programmes can aim at helping individuals mould a professional and inquisitive attitude and personality, rather than only helping them acquire new knowledge and skills.
- Participants need, at the outset, to be informed of or become aware of what they will learn as a result of the programme, and how they will learn it, leaving some space for negotiation of content, procedures and methods.
- Teacher education should not only focus on linguistic, pedagogical and broader methodological issues but also on high-order issues such as institutional development and programme design, management and evaluation.

## **Summary**

Over a three-year period of engagement with the professionals on this programme, we at INTED have become better informed as to how to 'tune' our MEd programmes to the needs of local participants. The Mexican group's special circumstances and aspirations which have been described in this paper were the starting point for the academic partnership with the four universities in the scheme; Marjon tutors' work served to provide opportunities for participants to develop and refine skills and knowledge to build on this base. A Masters programme can be a flexible and creative means of encouraging and supporting professional development – the Mexican programme of 1997-2000 enabled tutors to learn more about this process, knowledge which has been transferred to other contexts with some degree of success. In the long run, however, the success of this type of programme

depends on the quality of the partnership relationship. How to create and maintain this quality is a constant source of new learning.

## **Reference**

Salisbury, K. (1995) Integration on Part-Time Courses. In Pincas, A (ed) (1995) Spreading English: ELT Projects in International Development. Hemel Hempstead: Modern English Publications.

## **APPENDIX I**

### **Chronology of A Partnership**

1991 – Visits by Marjon tutors to Mexico to set up BPhilEd (ELT) programme

1992-1995 – BPhilEd programme I taught in Mexico

1996-1999 – BPhilEd programme II taught in Mexico

1996 – Plans for a Masters programme drawn up by UABC

Discussions between Marjon and UABC

1997 – Visit to UABC by Marjon tutors. Finalisation of the Masters programme

1998-2000 – MEd/BPhilEd (TTELT) programme taught in Mexico (one visit to UK in 2000 self-financed by course members)

## **APPENDIX II**

### **MEd/BPhilEd (TTELT) – Course Outline**

Module 1 – ELT Methodology and Materials

Module 2 – Classroom Observation and Supervision

Module 3 – Methodology and Materials for Teacher Training

Module 4 – Course Design for Teacher Training

Module 5 – Option: Materials Writing for ELT or Management in ELT

Dissertation (including Research Methods)