Interpreting Transnational Education Standards: The Locus of Control

Shelley Yeo a
Peter Ling b
Margaret Mazzolini c
Beena Giridharan d
Veronica Goerke e
David Hall f
Gillian Lueckenhausen g

a Dean, Teaching & Learning, Science & Engineering Faculty, Curtin University, Perth, Australia
b Project Officer, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
c Pro Vice-Chancellor, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
d Dean, School of Foundation & Continuing Studies, Curtin University, Sarawak, Miri, Malaysia
e Manager, Teaching Development, Office of Assessment, Teaching & Learning, Curtin University, Perth, Australia
f Research Officer, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
g Head, Education Quality, Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Abstract

Under ‘National Protocols’ established for higher education Australian universities are required to meet a consistent set of standards “regardless of whether its higher education students are located in Australia or offshore.” (MCEETYA, 2007, p. 2). In this context we report in this paper approaches to curriculum and assessment decision-making encountered in an investigation of transnational education and internationalisation. The investigation is a component of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project ‘Learning without borders: Linking development of transnational leadership roles to international and cross-cultural teaching excellence’; a project conducted by Curtin University and Swinburne University of Technology in Australia and in Sarawak. Meeting the same criteria specified in the National Protocols onshore and offshore can be and is addressed in different ways, even within the same higher education institution. In this paper we distinguish four approaches to curriculum decision-making designed to ensure the same standards are met. These may be styled: (a) home campus curriculum control, (b) limited branch campus learning, teaching and assessment contextualisation, (c) substantial branch campus learning, teaching and assessment contribution constrained by a requirement to attain the same learning outcomes, and (d) branch campus curriculum design. The locus of control varies between these approaches with implications for both the student experience and the professional experience and responsibilities of staff.

Keywords: transnational education, curriculum quality control

Introduction

In this paper we explore what is quality by examining approaches to curriculum and assessment decision-making encountered in an investigation of transnational education. The investigation is a component of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project “Learning without borders: Linking development of transnational leadership roles to international and cross-cultural teaching excellence”; a project conducted by Curtin University and Swinburne University of Technology. The two universities each have campuses in Australia and in Sarawak and the investigation was conducted in these four locations.

The question we examine here is: how do the universities investigated ensure that their branch campus programs maintain the standards required of Australian universities? We explore ways in which the
answer to this question is linked to the ‘locus of control’ between onshore and offshore teaching staff, which has implications for the student learning experience.

Universities Australia has developed guidelines for delivering programs onshore to international students and offshore to students through partner institutions (AVCC, 2005). The ESOS Act provides a regulatory framework focused on students studying in Australia. The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes provide guidance on quality assurance and control processes that “apply to all higher education functions of an institution, regardless of whether its higher education students are located in Australia or offshore.” (MCEETYA, 2007, p. 2). These documents do not prescribe how education should be delivered to students in offshore locations; it remains for institutions to interpret requirements. The Australian University Quality Agency (Baird, 2006) and the International Education Association Australia (2008) have, however, provided some guidance for universities by interpreting the requirements of the legislative framework.

**Related Literature**

Emerging from the literature are multiple interpretations of policy provisions and guidelines with practices varying within as well as between institutions. Woodhouse and Stella (2008) provide instances. A paper presented to AuQF in 2010 (Sanderson et al., 2010) explored the different interpretations placed on the terms *comparability* and *equivalence* (used in the National Protocols MCEETYA, 2000) when applied to assessment and moderation. Other research (Coleman, 2003; Eldridge, 2009) has highlighted how different cultures can produce variation or inconsistency in the ways in which policy and expectations translate into practice. In regards to this practice, Dobos (2011) discusses the pressures of accomplishing quality assurance on offshore academics, who have to respond to both Australian and local quality audits. Demands of internal quality measures can further complicate the role of an offshore academic, though this often depends on how much autonomy an institute allows. MacDonald (2006) suggests two extremes within institutions: *total control*, in which the program is designed by the Australian institution providing the offshore campus with no autonomy in relation to the content or delivery; and *colleagues in context*, in which the academics at the offshore campus, through collaboration with Australian-based academics, are able to adapt and contextualise a program for local students. A series of case studies (University of Western Australia 2009), provide examples of approaches by Australian institutions that operate somewhere between MacDonald’s diametric approaches. These case studies provide evidence of the variations in practice not only between institutions, but also between programs within institutions.

The approach taken has implications for the student learning experience as well as staff responsibilities. Mazzolini (2010) argues that “Approaches to TNE QA reflect our views of the ‘Australian educational experience’, and can be used to assert ‘control from a distance’, or to support the branch learning experience and internationalise our curriculum.” In order to realise the potential of offshore teachers to assist in internationalising the curriculum, Leask (2004) claims this would involve a reconstruction of roles involving more effective onshore and onshore communication and “a reconfiguring of extant power relationships” (p. 146).

We go on in this paper to describe the forms of relationships between home and branch campus staff that we observed and to reflect on some implications for staff and the student experience.

**Research Methods**

The project reported on here has involved data gathering through surveys completed at the Australian and Sarawak campuses of the project partner universities. Individual interviews have also been conducted at these campuses. Conduct of a symposium in Sarawak provided the opportunity for focus groups.

**Findings**

We investigated means employed by the participating universities to maintain the standards required of Australian universities in their branch campus programs. Various approaches to quality assurance were
observed between universities, within the same university and on the same campus. We have grouped our observations under four sub headings distinguished by the forms of unit and program coordination and the locus of control adopted.

Home Campus Control
At one end of the ‘control’ spectrum there were approaches that regulated offshore activities closely. One faculty offering programs onshore and offshore provided one such example. For quality assurance purposes all curriculum is developed at the home campus. Unit coordination is undertaken from the home campus only; no one offshore has the role or designation ‘unit coordinator’. Indeed unit coordinators in this faculty are sometimes referred to as unit controllers. One home campus coordinator stated “As I understand my role, one of my prime responsibilities is to ensure consistency of provision of course materials and course outcomes irrespective of location … I provide a teaching guide and revision notes. I provide material on BlackBoard. I make sure that teachers are on the same page. I provide a marking grid down to half of a mark.” A senior home campus academic explained that the unit coordinators are held accountable for standards as students receive a qualification from the onshore university and to ensure this coordinators need to be “direct employees of the university”. All assessment is set by the onshore university. The marking is done by staff of the home campus or at the least marking schedules are provided and all results are subject to moderation. Teaching activities are mostly driven by the home campus but there is some scope for local adaptation of teaching in tutorials. As one branch campus respondent reported “the Power Point slides and PDF files basically come from [the home campus]. Staff may introduce their way of presenting but by and large the content of the teaching material comes from [the home campus].” Again “the teaching methods are something like handed down. The package came with all the outcomes, assessment, PowerPoint slides and other documents. I went over the whole thing and modified just a little bit”.

This approach to the allocation of responsibilities has raised questions for some branch campus staff: “it requires some adjustment for people like me who have been independent earlier – not very used to getting suggestions from others.” Some branch campus staff in this situation would at least like “feedback on marking.” A home campus unit coordinator, who claimed “I have control of everything and it suits me”, nevertheless suggested “It would be good if we could exchange jobs for a week or two. I could get to know students. The [branch campus] people could see the scale of operation here.” Freedom to adapt may depend on the tenure of staff with more freedom granted over time but that doesn’t always apply. As one home campus coordinator observed “the branch campus staff members have been in position for some time. They have matured but we don’t have the mechanism to involve them.”

Limited Branch Campus Contextualisation
Strict home campus control of curriculum, learning resources, learning and assessment activities and marking was found to be adopted where a program was offered through a number of offshore and onshore providers – both public and private – some employing staff on a sessional basis only. The same approach was adopted for all campuses offering the program, including a branch campus. This approach was also adopted in some cases where the only offering outside the home campus was through a branch campus.

Another observed approach allowed for modest contextualisation by the branch campuses. This could include making suggestions about curriculum content drafted on the home campus, adapting some teaching and learning activities – for example case studies – to suit the local context and local students, and suggesting items for inclusion in assessment. A home campus coordinator reported “One person from [the branch campus] visited for 10 days during curriculum development, intensively going through the units and what he would like to change.” An alternative is moderation visits from the home campus academics where they “hear any problems they have had, changes they would recommend.” As one home campus coordinator acknowledged “the material we may be using here may not be appropriate to their context” so there needs to be some freedom to adapt.
For the most part, cooperative relationships work well. One branch campus respondent reported “The people I work with have been very reasonable. Comments they have given me about the exams I’ve always benefited from, and I greatly value that.” Again, “with teaching methods we stick to learning outcomes but the teaching is up to the teacher. We will contextualise for local context. We need contact [the home campus] when we contextualise.” Another branch campus respondent reported that “staff are free to present it in their own way. The initial information was on global warming for Australia but I asked if we could put in material for Malaysia.”

One branch campus respondent reported that a supposed freedom to make suggestions did not always work out in practice: “I have seen cases where the relationship was not very good and there was a lack of trust. Whatever we proposed they would not agree to.” A home campus respondent also reported: “They have the opportunity for providing feedback but rarely suggest change. Sometimes they have written a question” while a branch campus respondent stated: “I do my own lecture notes and I set my own exams which are moderated but … I don’t think I’ve had any involvement with curriculum development that’s anything of importance to the unit.”

The key features of quality assurance in this approach appear to be control of the degree of contextualisation together with moderation of branch campus student assessment by the onshore unit coordinator. This may be a review of all student assessment submissions or by sample, for example: “the top 3 papers, 3 average papers and 3 borderline papers.”

Limited branch campus contextualisation was found to apply mainly to units that were classed by one of the participation institutions as ‘ongoing’. It was adopted where there was continuity in staffing and a unit had been offered successfully for one or two semesters.

**Focus on Attaining the Same Learning Outcomes**

A further transfer of locus of control to branch campuses sometimes occurred in cases where the program has been offered over a number of years and the staffing is stable. This approach included providing alternative curriculum content elements, learning and teaching activities, and elements of assessment. This involves negotiation; as one branch campus respondent reported: “We work together [with counterparts] and take account of who has most experience in the topic. We gave feedback on the curriculum. The system is basically centralised. Both sides set assessment but both are the same. It gives quality control.” Again: “We redesigned curriculum and assessment between [the branch campus] and [the home campus] … Under the moderation agreement with [the home campus] we sent samples to Australia. Then an agreement was reached. It was bilateral.” Another branch campus respondent with considerable experience reported “I get some material from Australia, like unit outline, slides, etc., I generally just take it as guideline and I develop my own material, my own unit outline, and then I get approved, get suggestions from my counterpart. Teaching method also, I adopt my own … [I] do a lot of projects and case-based sessions. I found that the counterpart is not using the same approach. But it doesn’t matter.”

In some cases circumstances also dictate that a unit is offered only offshore during a particular semester. For example one branch campus respondent reported “I’m the only one teaching the course, so I’ve to write up the exam questions as well. I do that with the convenor on this campus.”

Here the key to quality assurance is a combination of requiring the same learning outcomes – where the outcomes may however be attained by alternative means – and moderation of assessment samples.

A high degree of branch campus contextualisation with a focus on attaining the same learning outcomes was found to apply to units that were classed by one of the participation institutions as ‘mature’. It was adopted where there was continuity in staffing and a unit or program had been offered successfully for some years.
**Curriculum Designed at the Branch Campus**

Finally there were situations where programs or units were developed and offered by the branch campus only, but could contribute to or constitute an accredited award of the home university. For example on one of the Sarawak campuses, Borneo Studies is offered as an elective. Respondents reported: “We do have specific electives units that we have developed ourselves so we are not entirely free of curriculum development responsibilities.” The other Sarawak campus has also accredited two master degrees to be offered only locally, arguably an inevitable trend if branch campuses seek to meet local expectations and student demand.

Here the key to quality assurance involves mature internal quality processes at the branch campus, in addition to those with the home campus. This requires that branch campus staff develop both curriculum development expertise and knowledge of regulatory requirements (Australian and local), thereby widening their professional skills set.

**Discussion and Reflection**

Four approaches to curriculum decision-making have emerged from this study. The approaches are distinguished by the locus of control in relation to decision-making on curriculum, assessment and learning and teaching matters generally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locus of control Areas of decision making</th>
<th>Home campus control</th>
<th>Limited branch campus contextualisation</th>
<th>Focus on attaining the same learning outcomes</th>
<th>Curriculum designed at the branch campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum design</td>
<td>Determined onshore</td>
<td>Determined onshore</td>
<td>Determined onshore but open to suggestions from offshore</td>
<td>Determined offshore with consultation and Australian accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and teaching resources and activities</td>
<td>Resources produced onshore and activities determined onshore</td>
<td>Resources produced onshore. Activities may, with agreement be contextualised.</td>
<td>Resources may be produced onshore or offshore. Activities may be devised onshore or offshore</td>
<td>Resources produced offshore. Activities determined offshore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Designed onshore</td>
<td>Designed onshore. Some items might be suggested by offshore teachers</td>
<td>May be designed on or offshore. Offshore design subject to approval onshore</td>
<td>Designed offshore with some consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student performance</td>
<td>Marked onshore or moderated onshore</td>
<td>Marked offshore and moderated onshore</td>
<td>Marked offshore and moderated onshore</td>
<td>Assessed offshore within guidelines or moderated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key features</td>
<td>The unit, learning activities and assessment are the same whoever delivers the unit</td>
<td>The unit and assessment are the same whoever delivers the unit. Learning and teaching activities may be contextualised</td>
<td>Unit learning outcomes are the same. Learning and teaching activities and assessment are contextualised</td>
<td>The program/unit is subject to QA processes consistent with Australian National Protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopted where</td>
<td>The program is offered through multiple providers OR a unit is offered on a branch campus for the first time or with new staff “new unit”</td>
<td>There is continuity of unit staffing and a unit has been offered successfully on a branch campus for a few semesters “ongoing unit”</td>
<td>There is continuity of unit staffing and a unit has been offered successfully on a branch campus for a number of years “mature unit”</td>
<td>The unit is offered only on the branch campus (though it might be taken by home campus students)</td>
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</table>
To go back to the challenge raised by the National Protocols referred to in the introduction, meeting the same criteria onshore and offshore can be and is addressed in different ways. Total uniformity is not essential for quality assurance purposes, for example as an AUQA occasional paper states:

Differences in assessment are not inherently problematic. The key issue for quality auditors is not whether the assessment regimes are the same for each location… The key question is whether or not the assessment regimes facilitate equivalent student learning. (Carroll & Woodhouse, 2006, p. 81)

Decisions on the approach to be taken may depend on the maturity of the branch campus operations, but have consequences for the experience of students and staff. In the first ‘one size fits all’ approach, the learning experience for home campus and branch campus students may not be the same if they cannot relate equally to the context (national, social) in which the curriculum was designed. In this approach, branch and home campus academics do not share the same level of professional responsibilities.

The second approach provides a student experience closer to that of home campus students and widens the professional experience of branch campus staff. The third approach does the same for students but requires staff to exercise professional skills to ensure the same learning outcomes at the branch campus and home campus. The final approach can provide the same sort of experience as students in other locations where the curriculum is designed within their context. This approach requires full professional responsibilities of branch campus staff in ensure that all Australian requirements are satisfied.

References


