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Your place or mine: transnational education and the locus of control

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In transnational education the place – in both an organisational and a geographic sense – in which educational decisions are made impacts on the academics involved and on student learning. The subject of this paper is learning and accreditation that takes place outside a home university through offshore branch campuses. A case study of two Australian Universities with offshore campuses in Sarawak, Malaysia was undertaken. Policies and procedures were reviewed and an empirical study of the experiences of academics involved was conducted. The study focused on who makes decisions about curriculum content, learning and teaching activities, design and provision of educational resources, and the assessment of student work. Consequences of the organisational relationships for academics involved and for student learning are examined in this paper. On the basis of the study a high degree of local control is recommended, at least for units of study that have operated transnationally several times.

Keywords: transnational education, organisation, offshore academics

The focus of the paper

The place of learning and teaching, the conference theme, is critical in transnational education in that one's geographic location in the transnational education transaction has implications for academic roles and responsibilities. Place in transnational education determines ownership

of educational decisions and impacts on work satisfaction and rewards, as well as on the professional development and career opportunities of academics. Further, place has consequences for student learning.

The focus of this paper is learning and accreditation that takes place outside the home institution through offshore branch campuses. Issues in the design and implementation of formal curriculum are examined; in particular the question of who makes decisions about curriculum content, learning and teaching activities, design and provision of educational resources, and the assessment of student work. Consequences of the organisational relationships for academics and students on branch campuses are examined. For academics the issue is their professional experiences and opportunities; for their students it is the pertinence of their learning experiences.

Context

Higher education operates in an increasingly globalised context (Urry, 2002) in which transnational education (TNE) is a feature. For the purposes of this paper TNE is defined as an arrangement for provision of higher education where students acquire an award in one country, which has been issued by a higher education institution based in another country (GATE, 1997).

Transnationalism in sociological terms refers to immigrant cohorts and to transnational social spaces (Roudometof, 2005). Whilst TNE does not refer to physical migration, it too has implications for social spaces that are pertinent to the topic addressed here for “transnational social fields pertain to the relations between individuals, organizations and agencies”, though “the people who are thus connected are not necessarily transnational” (Roudometof, 2005, p.120). TNE then occurs in the context of

contemporary processes of globalisation and regionalisation [that] create overlapping networks of power and interaction. These cut across regional boundaries (Held, 2003, p.466).

The question of power and control in TNE interactions relates to the focus of this paper and is addressed in the findings and conclusions.

A case study approach is taken in this paper (Yin, 2003) based on an Australian Office for Learning and Teaching project *Learning without borders*, which was conducted by the authors (see Mazzolini et al, 2012). The cases examined involve the main Australian campuses and the Sarawak, Malaysian campuses of Curtin University and Swinburne University of Technology. The project focused particularly on provision through a branch campus. A contribution of the TNE aspect of the project taken up in this paper is identification of a range of possible organisational relationships distinguished by the place or locus of control of curriculum design and other elements of learning, teaching and assessment.

Institutional imperatives relating to TNE, associated organisational arrangements for home campus and branch campus responsibilities, and consequences for academics involved have been addressed in pertinent literature. Debowski (2003) and Leask (2004) have written on the range of difficulties and challenges facing academics assigned to teaching offshore. Leask

also looks to consequences for local staff observing the differing roles and pressures placed on teaching staff in offshore campuses where Australian staff provide "intensive face-to-face blocks of teaching time" with the following tutorials being presented by local teaching staff who "take on the role of cultural mediator and translator". The local academics are considered the "ground force" who "finish off and clean up" as subsidiaries after the Australian staff have provided the main teaching. Leask argues that this structure and associated power relationships do not allow for local tutors to take on more equal roles (Leask, 2004). Mahmud, S. et al (2010), in an Australian Learning and Teaching Council project, focus on moderation of assessment by home campus academics, note that "TNE sites are often remote outposts 'when it comes to practices and processes associated with learning and teaching' (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007)" (Mahmud, S. et al., 2010, p.2). They observe that in "TNE moderation of assessment, not only is fairness to students an issue but also fairness to TNE partner institution staff" (p.2). Their research "revealed practices that actively work against staff collaboration and position TNE sites as 'remote outposts' rather than full partners in the learning and teaching cycle" (p.7). They claim a tension between these concerns and "the quality imperative for control by the Australian institution in the transnational relationship" (Mahmud, S. et al., 2010, p.2.) The consequences of TNE assessment practices issues for local staff and for student learning are taken up in the present paper. Mahmud et al. note that the process "is a complex task that requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration between all members of the teaching team (Dunn and Wallace, 2008)" and go on to state "this type of dialogic interaction also serves as a capacity building academic development activity for all staff" (Mahmud, S. et al., 2010, p.2.), a further point taken up in this paper.

Theoretical position and key issues

The key concept employed in defining the research questions and selecting the research methods is the notion of the "locus of control". The term locus of control is used here primarily in an organisational sense. The underpinning idea is that responsibilities in an organisation, in this case a university with a home campus and with associated locations offering its programs, may be distributed. The share of responsibility and authority attributable to personnel in organisational locations, and in the case of TNE geographic locations, can be mapped. In this paper locus of control is used to categorise possibilities for division of responsibilities in TNE between staff on the home campus and those on branch campuses. This leads to the first research question addressed: In a branch campus TNE operation who makes decisions about curriculum, learning and teaching activities and assessment of student work?

The term "locus of control" has also been used in psychology to refer to the impact on an individual's behaviour of the individual's understanding of whether a matter is within one's own control or is controlled externally to the individual (Rotter, 1966; Maltby, Day & Macaskill, 2007). While the expression locus of control is used in this paper to describe and categorise TNE situations in an organisational sense, the impact on individuals involved, both at home and at branch campuses, can depend, at least in part, on their understanding of whether particular TNE decisions are external to them or are within their control.

The distinction between "your place or mine" in the title of the paper is of significance then both in identification of organisational arrangements and the impression that those involved have of their autonomy; both may impact on their decision-making.

There are some constraints on universities in determining an appropriate locus of control for a program and some opportunities for flexibility. Using the definition of TNE employed here, one consideration for universities in determining the locus of control is that the academic program and award offered are those of the home institution. This is a concern of regulatory authorities in Australia. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) requires for third party provision effective mechanisms to manage and quality assure all aspects of the arrangement to ensure student learning outcomes equivalent to those when a course of study is delivered by the higher education provider (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013). Hence for quality assurance reasons – and associated university reputation – a degree of control by the home institution in TNE operations is essential. Beyond that, however, there is scope for some local decision-making on curriculum design, teaching resources, learning and teaching activities and assessment matters. A choice needs to be made.

Roudometof (2005) maintains

interactions and practices that take place in transnational social space involve the exercise of power relations by a multitude of agents and actors (, p.127).

In the case of TNE the framework for these interactions, the locus of control, may have consequences for personnel involved both on the home campus and on branch campuses and other sites at which programs are offered. The locus of control will influence the extent to which learning and teaching decisions are made locally, which in turn may influence the student learning experience. These possibilities lead to the second research question: What are the consequences of the organisational locus of control adopted in the operation of TNE and of people's perceptions of it for academics involved and for student learning?

Methodology

Addressing the research questions as they related to branch campus staff required data on the organisational arrangements for TNE and staff perceptions of the way they played out. The methods employed in exploring the research questions included web searches, review of policies and procedures, surveys, individual interviews and focus groups.

TNE policies and procedures of the institutions were designed to ensure that programs met with Australian and local accreditation requirements. A variety of models was adopted within each institution. They ranged from specification of all curriculum content and learning activities, provision of all learning resources, design and grading of all assessment by home campus academics, to simply requiring comparable learning experiences and learning outcomes on home and branch campuses. More detail on the models is provided in the findings below.

An online survey addressed operational aspects of TNE. The survey was designed for Swinburne University and Curtin University academics who were program co-ordinators and unit convenors for programs offered at a TNE location. The questionnaire investigated experience in working in offshore locations and views on what worked well and what did not. Sixty four responses were received.

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted to further explore staff experiences of working in a TNE context and staff views on how TNE and internationalisation policies and procedures can best support academics undertaking program co-ordination or unit convening roles. Interviews were conducted with 32 staff including Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and Deans/Associate Deans (International) at Swinburne University and Curtin University in Australia and program co-ordinators and unit convenors for TNE programs and units of study at both home campus and branch campus locations. Four focus group interviews were also conducted on Malaysian branch campuses in conjunction with project workshops.

Qualitative data was clustered and coded in *Nvivo*. Typical responses illustrate finding below (referenced as ‘Sur’ for surveys, ‘Int’ for interviews and ‘FG’ for focus groups)

The student learning experience element of the research questions was addressed indirectly using observations of branch campus staff and by comparing policies, procedures and practices with opportunities for contextualisation of learning and assessment desirable if a constructivist understanding of learning is adopted, as it is by the authors. Here constructivism is taken to include learning environments that emphasize authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context, where “knowledge is individually constructed and socially constructed by learners based on their interpretations of experiences in the world” (Jonassen, 1999, p.217).

Findings and discussion

Models

The investigation of TNE organisational arrangements and responsibilities indicated a variety of practices. In the *Learning without borders* project on the basis of observations locus of control arrangements were placed into four categories: home campus control, limited branch campus control, distributed control, and branch campus control.

It was found that the type of arrangement adopted has consequences for the academics involved both on the home campus and the branch campus. While a survey question investigating whether academics expected their involvement in TNE to have an impact on their careers, found only two of 64 expected a negative impact (home campus staff who saw involvement taking away from their research time), interviews with branch campus academics indicated a number of concerns, which are reported below.

Home campus control

Home campus control applies where curriculum design, teaching and learning activities and assessment were determined by home campus academics only.

The practice

This arrangement was found to occur mostly where the program is offered through multiple providers or a unit is offered on a branch campus for the first time or with new branch campus staff.

In practice home campus control may be exercised through the “fly-in-fly-out” model of delivery. The point, as one home campus coordinator put it, was that

Lecturers maintained the same standard as the main campus as major lecturing activities are conducted by the lecturers from the main campus (Int).

In other cases control is exercised by the home campus coordinator through specifying curriculum content, designing and providing teaching resources, determining assessment, and grading or moderating assessment.

The practice may vary a little from the model intended. As one coordinator reported

As unit coordinator for a unit which is also delivered offshore, I make the decisions about content, assessment and teaching activities. However, I am not sure how these are actually delivered offshore (Int)

Branch campus staff reported that unit content and delivery

is something like handed down. The package comes with all the outcomes, assessment, PowerPoint slides and other documents. I went over the whole thing and modified just a little bit (Int).

Another stated,

staff may introduce their way of presenting but by and large the content of the teaching material comes from [the Curtin home campus]. There is not a lot of contextualisation (Int).

Branch campus responses

Some branch campus staff saw the arrangement as positive. Some because it minimised the tasks of the offshore teacher – a consideration given high teaching loads – and some because “My involvement in that course gives me opportunity to work with experts from the home campus.” (Sur)

Home-based academics could see limitations in the way the fly-in-fly-out model plays out.

We were generally seen as promoting only the “Australian way” of doing things, and since few of the staff working there were Australian, there was some resistance to this as being the only way (Int).

There was some resentment apparent among branch campus staff.

I don't get much feedback / input from my colleagues overseas - its all one-way traffic flow - ex Aust! (Sur).

Your masters [on the home campus] and people here [on the branch campus] are not at the same level, but in some cases we have better staff here than in Melbourne. Why should it be one way? (FG).

For experienced staff on transnational campuses the arrangement can be seen as demeaning.

I see this as a negative impact because my academic colleagues around the world will see this as a low-grade contract-teaching kind of work. I must get out of this as soon as I can. I do not wish to be branded an “academic coolie” (Int).

It requires some adjustment for people like me who have been independent earlier – not very used to getting suggestions from others (Int).

Adopting the home campus control model has implications for career development for academics involved. Home campus staff can demonstrate leadership in curriculum design and implementation in a TNE context. Opportunities for the career development of branch campus staff are limited in this model to demonstrating teaching ability and possibly provision of some curriculum design advice.

Limited branch campus input

Limited branch campus control applies where there are opportunities for contextualisation of learning activities and/or assessment items. Assessment grading is conducted by home campus academics or a sample of graded work is moderated by home campus academics. This arrangement was found to be adopted where there was continuity of unit staffing and a unit has been offered successfully on a branch campus several times.

The practice

In practice, even with a fly-in fly-out component, there can be some branch campus input. A home-based academic reported

I conducted professional development activities with academic staff employed at off-shore campuses. My visits were fly-in-fly-out arrangements - usually between 5-10 days. Initially, the content was exactly the same as for the Australian university, but over time, this was slightly adapted to suit the local context (Int).

This model need not involve home campus staff visits. For instance a home campus coordinator reported

The unit was run overseas; 95% of contents in unit outline were similar to the [Swinburne home] campus. The assessment criteria and weight were not dissimilar. My role was to ensure the content of the unit was same as the [home] campus. I would moderate the final exams (Int).

Using this model local contributions are limited. “Teaching methods depend on us. I re-arrange Powerpoints. Some changes to previous notes designed on this campus” (Sur). “Depends on individual lecturer how much initiative he takes to make changes...” (Int).

Branch campus responses

The organisational relationship is sometimes seen favourably by branch campus staff.

I have been in direct touch with them [convenors in Australia]. Actually, whatever I do, whatever material I develop, whatever ... assessment task I do, I get in touch with them and get their suggestions also (Int).

What works well in this situation is “having a trusted and respected colleague” (Sur).

On the other hand the model does not always go to plan. A home campus unit coordinator reported,

What does not work at all is that I cannot check what the tutor actually teaches offshore. She is very independent, and if she does not like to use some material, or does not want to use the technology I suggest, she will not. There is not a lot I can do about it (Sur).

Where limited branch campus input applies branch campus staff can claim some experience in design and application of learning and teaching resources and activities, and possibly elements of assessment.

Distributed control

Under distributed control branch campus decisions on learning and teaching activities, assessment and to some extent curriculum content, are constrained primarily by attainment of the same learning outcomes as those applying on the home campus. The arrangement may involve sample assessment moderation. This arrangement tends to apply where there is continuity of unit staffing and a unit has been offered successfully at the branch campus for a number of years.

The practice

Classified in this model are arrangements such as the following, in the words of an offshore academic.

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 [at the home campus]. Teaching method also, I adopt my own (Int).

Again

The basic curriculum came from the Australian university, to be delivered in Malaysia. However, it seemed clear to me that I must change the teaching and learning structure and the assessment to make the curriculum more effective. The Australian colleagues accepted my proposals. Since the learning objectives are still the same, there has been no QA issue (Int).

Branch campus responses

Scope for local involvement in decision-making can be seen by branch campus staff to work well.

Basically I like to take the responsibility on my own ... as far as possible, because here in Sarawak, it is me who is teaching the course ... direct interaction with students and my counterpart sitting in Australia cannot actually have direct interaction with my students (Int).

Another branch campus academic stated

actually in Swinburne [Sarawak] we have a fair amount of freedom. My experience is, if I tell the other guy – my counterpart – is wrong... If I convince him he is wrong, he accepts it. If he convinces me I'm wrong, I also accept it. It works out very well (Int).

In the case of distributed control branch campus staff can demonstrate some experience in curriculum design, and in design and implementation of learning and teaching activities and assessment. Their challenge is to demonstrate that their students attain the same learning outcomes as those attained by students undertaking the unit on the home campus.

Branch campus control

Branch campus control can apply where units of study or programs are offered only on the branch campus though the qualification is awarded by the home campus institution. Such units or programs might also be available to students of the home campus.

The practice

At the Sarawak campus of Curtin University there has been some success in establishing new programs such as a Bachelors' Degree in Borneo Studies (Borneo Studies Major) that is only offered at the Malaysian Campus. In this sense the offshore campus is responsible for curriculum design and the implementation of the courses rest with branch campus academics. As the regional demands for new courses escalate, more courses will be designed and offered at the branch campuses.

Implications for branch campus academics

Where branch campus control applies, branch campus staff can demonstrate experience in design of curriculum content, learning and teaching resources and activities, and assessment design and grading. Their challenge is to demonstrate equivalence of student learning outcomes to those stipulated in the curriculum for similar units or programs offer elsewhere in the university.

Dynamics

In the case of the branch campuses that participated in this study there is pressure for increased local participation in educational decision-making. TNE arrangements offering Australian awards are audited by TEQSA, which regulates and assures the quality of Australian higher education (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2013). However, TNE campuses may also be audited by local authorities. The branch campuses in the study operate under the audit purview of national higher education qualification agencies including the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA), which oversees quality assurance practices and which implements the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF). The MQF provides a reference point for the criteria and standards for national qualifications (Malaysian Qualification Agency, 2012). Some programs also need to meet local professional accreditation requirements. This necessitates some local input to program design. The branch campuses in the study have been conferred self-accredited status by the MQA. This status mandates increasing autonomy in the development of the curriculum and the provision of new programs that particularly cater for regional needs. As educational hubs such as Malaysia continue to expand and be more competitive, demands for more autonomy in the design and delivery of programs and courses can be expected.

Consequences for the learning of offshore students

The locus of control adopted has consequences for student learning. The ability to take control of learning and teaching decisions locally was generally considered by offshore academics to be important in order to best provide for the learning of offshore students. One impact on the learning experience of branch campus students is assessment arrangements. Students have expressed concern about being “marked down” through moderation processes (Mahmud, S. et al., 2010). Assuming a constructivist understanding of student learning the concern goes beyond moderation to assessment design and selection of assessment items. These need to relate to the branch campus student context and experiences if they are to be as relevant to branch campus students as unit assessment is to home campus students. In a review of TNE Dunn and Wallace (2006) found that curriculum content was the same as presented in Australia with some local examples and case studies. They suggested this needs to be changed to be more relevant to the host country. In the present study focus groups pointed to the need to make curriculum “relevant to more than one country – due to socio-cultural, political, economic differences” (FG). They included in “what worked well” in TNE the freedom, after teaching the unit a couple of times, to provide “input into the curriculum via local case studies and examples” (FG). An interviewee provided an instance: “The initial information was on global warming for Australia but I asked if we could put in material for Malaysia” (Int).

While there can be quality assurance reasons for adopting a high degree of home campus control, there are learning disadvantages in limiting design of curriculum content, learning resources, learning and teaching activities, and assessment to home campus academics. Branch campus input allows local academics to draw upon pertinent local resources in learning and teaching activities. It allows account to be taken of the culture, experiences and context of local students in design and implementation of content and assessment, making the educational experience more meaningful to students. This is critical if one adopts a constructivist understanding of learning processes. To employ only educational resources, content, and learning and teaching activities and assessment designed for home campus students, places branch campus students at a disadvantage. The *Learning without borders* project recommended allowing for inclusion of international examples in curriculum content and educational resources for students both at home and offshore, allowing teachers to include their own local and international examples, adopting teaching and learning methods that accommodate the likely range of the educational and social backgrounds of student cohorts in different locations, and contextualising aspects of assessment tasks to fit local and international contexts. (Mazzolini et al, 2012)

Conclusion

Your place or mine? The allocation of ownership of educational decisions between academics who are home campus based and those on branch campuses, along with individual’s perceptions of their autonomy, influence the career opportunities of the academics involved and has consequences for the learning opportunities of their students.

Using the definition of TNE adopted here the qualification awarded is the qualification of the home institution. For this reason Australian universities offering programs through TNE are obliged to conform to Australian regulatory and quality assurance requirements. This places

some limits on the extent to which educational decisions can be made independently on branch campuses though, as Smith (2009) observes, the host country may demand increasing involvement in the accreditation process.

There are advantages in a high degree of home campus control in providing resources and close guidance for academics new to teaching in a particular area. The social learning perspective referred to by Rotter (1966) can work in harmony with an organisational locus of control that is home campus oriented in the case of new units and academics new to teaching. It was apparent from the empirical study that within a single model of control academics had differing understandings of the extent of their freedom to make decisions and their constraints. Younger academics, who had little exposure to teaching in international higher education settings, were more inclined to believe that educational decisions were outside their control than more experienced academic staff at branch campuses. This, however, may also apply to new academics based on home campuses.

That said, allowing adaptation of curriculum, teaching resources, learning and teaching activities and assessment items to suit the learning experiences, learning preferences and learning context of students studying on branch campuses, has advantages for student learning. It also has advantages for the experiences and career opportunities of academics on branch campuses. If TNE academics are to have the same opportunities for career development as academics on the home campus they need to be afforded opportunities for involvement in educational decision-making. In addition as branch campuses must meet regulatory, quality assurance and professional requirements that apply in host countries, local academics are in the best position to address these requirements.

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