

Structuring informal orientation of branch campus university academics– creating tools and opportunities to link semi-formal induction to ad hoc peer guidance

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Abstract: *This paper presents a case study of how the international department of a business school in one Australian university organised staff induction to ensure academic quality assurance for Transnational Education (TNE) students in business courses. Discussed also are some of the organisational challenges brought about by distance, culture, language, pedagogic differences and practices encountered at various locations. Strategies emergent from a new staff induction program implemented by Curtin Business School (CBSi) international office informed the continuous improvement of the induction processes and quality assurance matters aligned to these. Of particular importance to the staff induction program discussed here are the approach to workloads and role clarity. Matters of quality assurance and equivalence of the learning experience for TNE students are also explored from the perspective of having operational practices that are universally understood and seamlessly applied across multiple campuses. The organisational learning from the program additionally led to the development of a readily updateable induction resource artefact (USB based) that was relevant to all locations, including the main campus. This staff-use artefact includes of a suite of text and video based resources detailing course materials, approved practices, protocols, and contact links. It is designed to act as the first point of enquiry for staff seeking further information or assistance with all aspects of their teaching and learning in CBSi transnational education courses. At the commencement of each teaching period, all staff teaching in CBSi courses are now issued with a copy of the USB, or for those already with a copy, have this updated via the web to reflect changes in unit coordinators or other important personnel contacts, course changes, or regulatory information. The USB format for this resource was chosen to ensure staff not having ideal internet access could still access the materials via personal computers.*

Keywords: *transnational education, pedagogic differences, induction.*

Introduction

Contemporary higher education in the twenty first century is characterised by the prominence of transnational education (TNE) which has emerged from a cottage industry into core business for a number of Australian universities (Leask, 2004). TNE in higher education is also known as ‘franchised’, ‘offshore’, ‘international collaboration’, ‘cross border’ education (Naidoo, 2009; Huang, 2007) and has a range of drivers and formats. Drivers include the commodification of education, trade liberalisation, capacity building, reduced public funding and subsequent access to new income streams, technological advances and global mobility of people and expertise (Smith, 2010). Although formats of TNE vary, few ensure total control by the parent universities.

Branch campus TNE operations must conform with local accreditation requirements of host countries resulting in a diminishing of parent university control and increased branch campus autonomy. Another form of TNE engagement takes the form of twinning programs where a partner organisation in the target country provides infrastructure and local staff to deliver the (in this case) Australian degrees alongside other offerings (Macdonald, 2006). Historically twinning operations had a component of the teaching undertaken by parent university academic staff. This arrangement has proven to be expensive, limiting, difficult to sustain, and has gradually fallen out of favour. For the purpose of this paper all TNE activities and engagements where the parent university offers courses through a local facilitator are referred to as branch campuses since the dynamics, exposure and interactions are generally similar.

Branch Campus Dynamics

Locally delivered Australian TNE programs attract students through lower fees, the Australian qualification, a familiar culture and education system and more accommodating visa requirements (Macdonald, 2006). In addition, students see the branch campus as part of the parent university and operating under the same brand.

At the operational level the presence of the branch campus creates significant tensions through increased workloads and accountability of parent university academics while not enhancing their career progression. Operating in the TNE environment, especially in the form of a branch campus often creates tensions between academic and commercial priorities, thus requiring quality assurance systems in what can be a risky venture that holds significant corporate risks (Smith, 2010).

Macdonald (2006) acknowledges that branch campuses have a unique set of quality assurance conditions as they are sandwiched between requirements and expectations of the local stakeholders and regulators and the Australian university and accountability framework. In addition Smith (2009) argues that TNE is fundamentally fraught with tension as virtually all branch campus activities are largely for-profit, driven by growth in enrolment numbers, and inherently challenge the maintenance of academic standards. The notion of finding the ‘quantity-quality’ equilibrium plays itself out more prominently in the TNE environment than anywhere else in the tertiary education sector.

Curtin Business School International office approach to branch campus program

The manner in which Curtin Business School International office (CBSi) has organised its branch campus operations is presented here as a case study (indicated by shaded boxes in this document) in order to contextualise how the educational and management strategies that underpin TNE delivery have been integrated to ensure quality through academic development and moderation practices.

Case Study Box 1: TNE at CBSi: Complexity and quality challenges

The Curtin Business School International (CBSi) office has oversight of numerous TNE programs, delivered by Branch Campuses, through twinning programs and articulation partners in different locations. The complexity of its program offerings makes the task of ensuring ‘equivalence of student learning’ across all its programs extremely difficult. The equivalence of student learning is core to the Curtin University approach to TNE and includes aspects such as uniform standards of teaching and learning delivery, moderation of assessment, administrative procedures and accountability to the overarching Curtin governance practices and procedures. In 2009 CBSi appointed an Academic Director tasked with ensuring overall academic quality assurance aimed at establishing a uniform level of student learning across all delivery locations including Sydney, Singapore, Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. At the time the onus of the student learning was predominantly carried through the parent campus unit coordinators (UC) who often struggled to understand and execute their role and responsibilities. Although this worked in some instances in others it did not – overall a review of TNE operations indicated the need to develop a cohesive and uniform approach and practice across all aspects of CBSi operations.

Branch campus context

Hicks and Jarret (2008) see the delivery of TNE university education as being characterised by complexity including cultures, roles, settings, programs and modes of delivery, as was the case for CBSi in regard to its branch campus arrangements. The first and most fundamental contextual difference is the educational and pedagogic approach between the parent institution and the branch campus countries shaping behaviour and expectations of both lecturers and students. Teaching in higher education consists of a combination of student-centred and teacher-centred delivery (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). While the Western based education environment is dominated by a student centred approach (facilitate student learning); teaching in South East Asia is dominated by a teacher-centred (transmissive styled) approach. In a branch campus situation this difference translates in tensions between the focus of the mode of delivery, the composition of study material, and expectations in assessment and outcomes.

An additional layer of complexity exists where both students and staff are engaging in their second language. Practical matters of vocabulary and linguistics emerge alongside the wider social challenges of interacting with material and colleagues from an English first language background at the parent university. This requires additional effort in explaining and understanding content often requiring special considerations and sometimes allowances from the parent university (Miller 2007). While local lecturers report the lack of English language proficiency causing difficulties for students in Hong Kong they did not contemplate including language strategies in their course as the focus is on academic content.

A classic example of cultural differences impacting on educational interpretations is the notion of plagiarism creating unease at branch campuses as students and staff sometimes hold a different cultural expectation (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Youmans (2011) reports that a soft

approach to plagiarism can be counterproductive and encourage further academic misconduct. Although Leask (2004) argues strongly for a need to engage branch campus staff in curriculum development so as to ensure material and pedagogy are adapted to suit local conditions at the branch campus, Dunn and Wallace (2006) argue that this is a condescending approach denying the capability of Asian and other cultures to selectively engage with and critically assess the relevance of a Western approach. The approach taken by CBSi was to use local knowledge and context in applications wherever appropriate, but retain a uniform overarching approach to content, standards of teaching, assessment and moderation as a means to providing a uniform student learning experience across all delivery locations. Assuring quality assurance at CBSi began with a hands-on approach.

Case Study Box 2: Maintaining TNE quality awareness

Despite CBS having extensive experience in TNE delivery there were elements of mistrust and discord towards the offshore locations which was exacerbated by the parent university demanding greater accountability to compliance requirements while removing financial incentives associated with the program. To facilitate effective quality assurance in the current systems, CBSi structured the induction of staff involved in the delivery of TNE programs through the use of a 'Flying in Flying out' (FIFO) workshop and a faculty specific manual outlining the key policies and protocols to be followed by all UCs in their managing of TNE courses and tutors in non-Bentley campus locations. Feedback from staff who attended the workshops and used the manual was positive, but limited to those in the UC positions. What emerged was a need to address the wider teaching and administrative cohort in CBSi so as to develop a more uniform practice across all areas of operations.

The role of academics in TNE delivery: Skills, Capabilities and roles

Blackmore and Blackwell (2006) note that traditional roles of teaching and research are being eroded by academia now being more compliance driven and academics' status and roles more focused on ensuring minimum standards (Archer, 2008). In a branch campus this may result in an additional layer of expectations, increased work and, reduced attention from academics at the parent university. While Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007) deplore increased accountability and control in academe, Kreber (2010) notes the fragmentation of academic labour as having increased administrative tasks with decreased autonomy. The CBSi branch campus situation had a disproportionate sharing of tasks and responsibilities that led to some resentment and confusion concerning role responsibilities. This aligns with findings by Leask (2004) who sees branch campus staff as being unequal members of the teaching team as the curriculum of almost all TNE programs is planned and developed by the parent university as the awarding institution with little or no reference to branch campus input.

Macdonald (2006) reiterates that quality assurance of a program offshore is predicated on having quality academic staff in both locations, even though findings indicate that the vast majority of offshore academic staff at branch campuses lacked experience in tertiary education, were well qualified but lacked knowledge of university operations, had an absence of research expertise or awareness of academic roles. Such characteristics were evident in some CBSi branch campus practices where staff selection sometimes occurred without compliance to the parent university protocols resulting in appointments thought inappropriate by UCs when later examined.

Branch campus staff recruitment is difficult and Macdonald (2006) argues that 'simply filling the roster' is a relief. Such recruitment may be secondary to the recruitment of students to

meet enrolment targets. Ultimately like any professional, branch campus academics need to be clear on roles, expectations, responsibilities and criteria used to determine acceptable outcomes. Induction for such staff should not be ad hoc.

Case Study Box 3: Establishing TNE quality awareness at the branch campus

In 2010 a new program to expand the reach and richness of the staff development workshop sessions was established. Called the Offshore Staff Induction Onshore (OSIO) program, this initiative sought to unify the teaching and learning culture across all Curtin delivery locations. The OSIO program content was informed by institutional resources, experiences by CBS staff, program content and experiences by the various representatives (a total of 20 participants) and included the following: academic governance; regulations and administrative practices; plagiarism; student centred learning; assessment; moderation and observations of teaching sessions with award winning lecturers.

A conscious effort was made to create an inclusive, informal and participative environment to ensure participation and engagement through social and recreational activities aimed to encourage networking and to promote the establishment of collegial relationships.

TNE Focused Staff Development

Academic development has grown to be a significant factor in the reconstitution of higher education through bodies like the Staff and Educational Development Association in the United Kingdom, the Professional and Organisational Development Network in Higher Education in the United States and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (Clegg, 2009). Common aspects of academic development include amongst others the contribution to international strategy and policy on learning and teaching; leading peer review, mentoring, development of resources and support; quality enhancement; and management related to enhancing academic practice (SEDA, 2007).

The complexity of learning to teach in the tertiary education environment combined with uncertainty of achieving goals is reported to contribute to high levels of anxiety with new staff (Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Although professional development programmes can provide campus staff with key information about procedures and rules required by the main campus, little acknowledgement is made of the different educational and cultural context (Hicks and Jarrett, 2008). Interaction between branch campus staff and those at the parent campus is usually formal and minimal, resulting in adverse effects on branch campus staff learning as they miss both elements of legitimate peripheral participation identified by Lave and Wenger (1991). An inclusive approach would see branch campus staff progressively engage with all aspects of the parent campus culture of operations. Warhurst (2008) reiterates the reality of the incidental, almost accidental, manner in which new lecturers appropriate existing ways of knowing and doing at universities. In an Australian university study, Smith (2009) noted how acceptable practices and an interpretation of policies and procedures is passed on informally from previous lecturers to new lecturers in what could be described as ad hoc peer orientation.

In the Australian context AUQA has highlighted the need to provide better induction for branch campus staff, including the long overdue requirement to strengthen and formalise the relationship between parent university and branch campus lecturers (Dunn and Wallace, 2006). The staff development of branch campus academics invariably includes aspects beyond the traditional teaching and learning staff development of the parent university. These aspects include the development of what Macdonald (2006) calls 'teaching for student

participation'. Local academic staff need to not only understand their role within the greater entity of the university but also reconceptualise their understanding of their teacher role (Fullan, 1991, Miller, 2007). Macdonald (2006) notes a pressing need for branch campus academic staff to be fully inducted into the Australian university teaching and learning model, preferably through a program of information, orientation, induction, appraisal and guided reflection as part of a professional community. The reality is that newly appointed staff often report the feeling of being neglected and isolated when not working at the main campus of the university (Warhurst, 2008). To address such matters, CBSi created a readily updated common resource tool for distribution to all academic staff operating in TNE settings.

Case Study Box 4: Towards comprehensive TNE quality awareness

In 2011 it was decided to build on the successful OSIO program by creating a readily updateable thumb drive based body of resources to be issued to all staff involved in TNE through CBSi. The USB was CBS branded in an effort to strengthen the offshore tutors' allegiance with CBSi and as a source of bonding and identification for overseas staff. The content of the induction material was broad and included good teaching practices; answering student questions; relevant Curtin policy documents and inappropriate behaviours.

Towards Comprehensive TNE Quality Assurance

In establishing the development of staff across branch campuses Mazzolini (2012) noted the interdependence of branch campus and parent university staff in the delivery of comparable and quality assured courses. Over time, the relationship between the parent university and branch campus evolves and improves, and quality assurance improves when communication is channelled through a few key personnel who should be encouraged to develop a shared vision and ownership of the TNE process and its activities (Smith, 2009). The resource tool developed for use by all CBSi staff was designed to accommodate these changing relationships in that it can be readily updated to reflect changing staff roles and administrative practices.

Feedback, from staff at all levels of CBSi TNE delivery, shaped the development of the new CBSi initiatives such that they were appropriate and effective in raising teaching and learning standards and complied with university academic standards demanded of branch campus university programs. Case Study Box 5 details outcomes from this process.

Case Study Box 5: Ongoing TNE improvements

The FIFO and OSIO programs continue as an iterative process designed to keep all TNE staff involved in CBSi courses supported in their teaching and learning. Complemented by the induction USB, continuous contact between UCs, the CBSi Academic Director and local tutors in all Curtin TNE locations is achieved by allowing for instant updates of changes in the culture of practice including Curtin rules, regulations and protocols. A new model for branch campus operations was developed around CBSi initiatives to ensure quality assurance in TNE operations in 2012 with particular focus on processes for staff recruitment and induction, assessments, report of processes and moderation of practices.

The 2012 repeat of the OSIO session ensured that problems and issues identified during, and experienced since, the 2010 OSIO session were mostly resolved through efficient information sharing and a united understanding of and approach towards CBSi TNE delivery. An increased clarity of parent university expectations by branch campus staff and awareness of

branch campus realities and limitations by UCs established the following characteristics of the TNE interaction:

- an underlying collaborative culture of practice,
- a sense of belonging to the CBSi community,
- an improved insight and better understanding of parent campus practices,
- clarity around compliance expectations and frameworks for accreditation,
- a raft of new strategies for dealing with branch campus operations, and
- a commitment to TNE quality assurance across all CBSi locations.

Since the outcomes of the multi-layered approach to embedding a quality assurance awareness for TNE operations delivered favourable results, plans have been set in motion to maintain, monitor and improve the reach and complementarity between the FIFO, OSIO and induction UCB tools. The underlying cultural change will most likely be the driving force for embedding quality assurance as an integral part of the CBSi TNE dna and ensure more uniform student learning experience and a more uniform Curtin teaching experience in TNE through CBSi.

Future development of OSIO and the TNE resource tool

Reflecting upon the OSIO initiatives it was agreed that future sessions would include more time for participant interaction for relationship building and sharing of strategies for dealing with issues particular to the cohort's various settings. Running OSIO every year at a time that allows for dissemination of information to new tutors in all settings would be highly desirable for promoting professional development and connectedness of staff across teaching locations. The improved relationships between participants has proved to be invaluable for implementing quality assurance and compliance to policy now that there is greater ease of communication and understanding of other's roles.

In future OSIO sessions there will be greater involvement of Curtin onshore staff in the workshop sessions and in the social activities to encourage greater collegiality and awareness of each other's issues. The USB resource will be also be more widely distributed so that all Curtin staff involved with CBSi TNE will have the same body of information at their disposal when seeking to implement policy or assessments or moderation or operational practices. This will ensure a more uniform student learning experience, a more uniform Curtin teaching experience in TNE through CBSi.

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