

# FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES AFFECTING OFFSHORE EDUCATION: EXPERIENCE FROM A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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**Abstract :** Based on his experience in an offshore campus of an Australian university in a developing country, the writer, using the replies to a questionnaire given to the staff and students of the campus, investigates fundamental issues affecting the delivery of the academic program within the campus. The major issues discussed include the suitability of the curriculum, sensitivity to cultural differences, effective teaching methodology, and competence in language skills. The provision of offshore education overcomes many of the difficulties faced by international students who travel overseas to study, and if attention to these four fundamental issues is maintained, then there is more likelihood of the continued sustainability of international education by Australian universities.

**Keywords:** offshore education; language; pedagogy; curriculum; cultural understanding

## INTRODUCTION

In the past, international education has been largely thought of in terms of students who travel from their own country to study in another country. For more than ten years, many students from Asia, Africa and other less well-developed regions have left home to study in countries such as USA, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and non-English speaking countries. In 2011, there were 308,234 overseas students enrolled at Australian universities, of whom, 26 per cent were offshore students (NETU, 2012). Over the eight preceding years, offshore students at Australian universities had increased by 24.7 per cent. This means there has been a substantial growth in offshore education delivered by Australian education providers. One offshore delivery method has been the establishment of offshore campuses (Heffernan, Morrison, Basu, & Sweeney, 2010; Naidoo, 2009; Mok & Xu, 2008; Huang, 2003). Some international sources predict that, by 2020, 40% of higher education by English-speaking countries will be delivered transnationally to around

1.4 million students (IEAA, 2008). Maslen (2005) predicted that the number of students studying in overseas campuses of Australian universities will outstrip those studying in Australia. Although this is not so at the present, providers as well as students are now becoming increasingly mobile (IEAA, 2008).

ABS (2012) reported that in 2011 the expenditure of international students was 9.927 million dollars. The dimension of the importance of international students to Australian universities was realized when Lubbers and Dale (2005) reported that one in ten of the world's international students studied in Australia and that this made the sale of education to international students one of Australia's largest exports. Along with this development, Dixon and Scott (2004) maintain that there is an increasing climate of accountability and appraisal within Australian universities which frequently focuses on improving the standard of higher education teaching. This suggests that it is significant that at a time when Australian universities are attracting more and more international students they are also seeking to raise the level of education offered, regardless of whether it is on onshore or offshore.

Within the practice of offshore education, there are many hidden problems which may not at first be realized. This is especially so when it is pursued on a large scale. Students leaving their own country to study overseas face many difficulties. Those who choose to stay in their own country and study at an offshore campus also have many problems to face, but they are fewer than those faced by the students who travel overseas. These difficulties, such as the suitability of the curriculum, cultural awareness, economic standards and so on, were brought home to the author when he was teaching in an offshore campus in a developing country. They were more evident because the campus contained local students of two different racial groups and overseas students from several countries. The programs offered to these students were the same as those offered to local

students in the Australian university, as they generally are in offshore campuses.

### RESEARCH METHOD

To gain an idea of how participants in this venture felt about the effectiveness of this offshore campus, the author carried out research by means of questionnaires. These were answered by samples of students both past and present, members of staff both academic and administrative, and course coordinators in Australia. The questionnaire covered much more than the work contained in this paper. For the purpose of this research, the author is looking at the replies given to questions intended to concentrate on the main educational difficulties within the campus.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Suitability of the Curriculum

The world described in the textbooks and generally discussed by teachers is a world in which international students may have had no experience. They may come to understand eventually but it takes them a much longer time. Students may well feel that what they are learning is totally irrelevant to their home situation. Even if they are interested, they might find it very difficult to see how they could possibly apply the knowledge they are learning in the classroom to practical situations in their own country. Bartell (2003) agrees that in order to internationalise the university program, it needs to conduct a curriculum review to ensure emphasis on the international dimensions of the issues studied. He further suggests that some fields of study, owing to the nature of their disciplines and the use of mathematics as the universal language, have been internationally oriented, while others, for example the social sciences, tend to have a more narrowly-defined focus characterized by a national, or at most, North American approach.

The question of the suitability of the curriculum was asked of the current students, academic staff and ex-students. The current students were generally accepting of the courses provided but many of them felt that they would find them more valuable if they were more relevant to the local situation. Academic staff members were more critical of the course material. For example, a lecturer in accounting suggested that one section of the course on Australian industrial relations proved difficult for the students because they had no understanding of the Australian industry environment and therefore it was difficult to maintain their interest. There was a regular complaint that the examples in the course material made no reference to the situation within their own country and that many assignments referred to specific

Australian scenarios. They thought that courses would have been better if they could have had more of a local focus. It is interesting to note that past students were more affirmative in pressing for local relevance in the course than either the current students or the staff.

Course coordinators in Australia were quite divided about the inclusion of local content. Some were hesitantly supportive but one radically suggested that he would like to see courses developed at the offshore campus which could be offered back to the home campus, courses which had a distinctive local flavour and which would help internationalize the students. Many were concerned about the problem of equity if local content was allowed into the course, but several suggested that although the skills should be the same, the samples given in class could conceptualize the content to local ways.

Granted that all this is true, there surely is a case for some consideration of the modification of the university's curriculum requirements for students in offshore campuses. Crabtree and Sapp (2005) commenting on their experiences of teaching in Brazilian institutions mention the conflict between commitment to a particular curriculum and having to adapt to a cross-cultural teaching environment. They found that the energy and orientation required to fulfil the demands of the curriculum and adapt to the need for different teaching methods were at odds with the expectation that they cover the same curriculum in Brazil as they would on their own country.

#### Sensitivity to Cultural Differences

It increases the effectiveness of Australian staff members in an offshore campus if they have a fair understanding of the culture of the country and that care is taken in the selection of staff working in such a campus. Rothwell (2005) has pointed out that in an offshore campus there should be an effective working relationships between visiting lecturers and the local staff. He states that there is a "need for individuals who teach in offshore campuses to have academic and pedagogical competence with sensitivity to other cultures and the prevailing learning style and an understanding of the dangers of 'academic imperialism'" (Rothwell, 2005, p. 4). However, in some instances, local governing bodies will only permit the establishment of an offshore campus if the parent institution can guarantee an adequate proportion of its staff working in the offshore campus. Rothwell (2005, p. 2) reports that the Israeli Council for Higher Education, "concerned about the variable quality of many foreign universities operating in Israel, imposed a requirement that 30 per

cent of their teaching had to be delivered by staff from the parent institution”.

It also increases the effectiveness of the student’s learning if they are socially competent. Sociologists argue about the definition and nature of social competence, but one definition given by Nowak and Weiland (1997, p. 2) is “a dynamic process ‘drawing on the individual’s cognitive, linguistic and social capabilities’”. It implies adaptive, as well as assertive, action with regard to the environment and knowing how to use one’s existing knowledge.

In order for students to gain a better understanding of a course taught in an offshore situation, it is necessary that they should acquire a fundamental knowledge of the culture and values of the local country which they will need to be socially competent. However, such knowledge should be presented in an objective way and is best done in an informal way as an adjunct to the set curriculum rather than being devised as a separate unit. Cultural issues are a major factor in creating problems within an offshore campus. Taylor (1997) has described culture as something that is acquired, not inherited.

Social competence is an attribute that students in home campuses should also acquire. In the situation in which the research was undertaken there was quite a large mix of cultures and languages both among the staff and the students. Amongst the questions asked of staff and students were queries about whether they had any difficulties with the different teaching styles and whether they felt the cultural diversity of the campus hindered their progress. Although students suggested that they did not really mind the racial and cultural mix they did comment that it was difficult at times because each of the staff had his/her own way of teaching, but that this did not really matter. In any case such a problem might occur in any modern-day university. They were more inclined to judge individual staff members by the effectiveness of their teaching and this cut across cultural groups. As far as the mix of students was concerned, most of the students surveyed agreed that this was challenging and interesting.

Another aspect to culture understanding is the need for teachers trying to cater for the needs of the international students to have an understanding of their own culture. Barbeito (1997) asserts that one must understand oneself and become self-conscious about one’s culture as it gives one a basis for beginning to plan for adaptation to other cultures. Generally speaking, the teachers surveyed felt that many of their course coordinators in the parent university had little concept of the culture of the country where the offshore campus was stationed and little empathy for the conditions under which they

had to work. This feeling was confirmed in many of the replies from course coordinators who felt that they were not well informed about the conditions and culture in the country of the offshore campus.

### **Effective Teaching Methodology**

The teaching of international students must necessarily demand a review of the pedagogy used by academics working in offshore campuses. Australian academics working in an offshore campus may have to alter their style of teaching and may have to experiment with different methods to find a way that works best with the international students in their classes.

The questionnaire given to the students did not target individual pedagogical methods but it did ask for general comments about the teaching. Many students found it difficult to cope with the different accents of the teachers as they varied greatly from each other. Some students felt that the language used was often beyond their understanding. The students implied that teachers using such language made no attempt to elucidate the meaning of difficult words and of jargon words peculiar to their subject. Another comment made was that some teachers merely read the lectures and seemed to be limited in the knowledge of their subject. Others pointed out a need for experienced teachers with cross-national knowledge and experience. Some of these comments would have referred to casual staff whom the campus necessarily used because of shortage of skilled personnel in the local community. On the other hand, teachers complained about the difficulty of encouraging the students to play an active part in class discussion and activities. They also felt that their lack of analytical skills prohibited them from reacting to curriculum material. Such problems as the limited language of the students, their reluctance to take part in class activities, the limited experience of some of the staff added to the lack of adequate equipment made it difficult for some members of staff to apply innovative methodology to their delivery. However, there were members of staff, mostly overseas trained, who managed to excite student interest by creative means.

Liddicoat (2003, p. 20) maintains that “internationalised teaching involves more than a change in curriculum. It also involves a change in teaching practice”. Conducting an offshore campus is not just a matter of dumping a little piece of Australia in a foreign country, nor should it be assumed that the teaching methods and even the ideas of what constitutes good teaching will be the same in the country of offshore campus as it is in Australia. Dixson and Scott (2004 p. 2) assert that many

overseas academics have alternative views about what constitutes good or appropriate teaching based upon differing cultural perspectives to learning with the prevalent perception that constructivist, active learning strategies being inappropriate, non-viable and unhelpful within the Singapore or Hong Kong contexts. Kayrooz, Milne and Ward (2005) found that there are significant differences between East and West in the value of foundational knowledge, appropriate roles and relationships for teachers and students, the process of teaching and attributions of responsibility for effective teaching.

Many people believe that a much needed and overdue reform is due in universities everywhere and that agendas for open and transparent teaching methods and assessment processes are placing pressure on academics to do something about their knowledge of teaching. It has been said that "there should be a move away from a focus on good teaching to a focus on good learning" (Robertson 2002, p. 278).

There are those who believe that the standard of teaching can be improved with an increased use of technology. This issue is still being debated and there are those who have tried to use technology and found it did little to help. However, it is generally assumed that to use technology is a way of increasing student learning outcomes. Most teachers feel under some degree of pressure to use technology in their teaching. Carpenter and Tait (2001, p. 200) in their research discovered that opinions about technology vary from teacher to teacher. One senior lecturer said that he felt that there was a certain amount of subtle pressure upon academics to use technology for technology's sake. They also revealed that the more traditional lecturers are more likely to use technology. Nowadays modern technologies offer a variety of means of helping in the presentation of educational material but one needs to know the methods of using these new devices in order to maximize their effectiveness. A PowerPoint presentation used unimaginatively can be just as boring and ineffective as an old-fashioned 'talk and chalk' lesson.

### **Competence in Language Skills**

One difficulty for international students is that of language. Pearson and Beasley (1996, p. 1) state that despite a great deal of research, the exact nature of the studying and learning problems of overseas students in English is still relatively unclear. The international student who wishes to study in an English-speaking country or in an offshore campus established by an English-speaking home university certainly needs to be competent in English. He or she has to comprehend spoken English and speak the language so that he or she can be understood. Further

he or she must be able to read and comprehend written English and be able to write English in such a way that can be understood by a native English speaker. The level of the language required should enable the student to understand and participate in discussion at a reasonably sophisticated level. Sometimes a student is not aware of his or her own deficiency in this area. On the other hand, he or she may be so concerned with language problems that studying the language takes up too much of his or her time so that his or her effort goes into overcoming English problems rather than concentrating on the content of the subject concerned.

The situation researched was compounded by the fact that the English language skills of one sector of the students were superior to those of the other sector. This was largely because the first group of students belonged to a country that had been a British colony where English language skills were fairly well entrenched, while the other group was from countries that had had no previous contact with English language or culture. As a result, the students from the former British colony did not feel that their English needed to be improved but some of those from other countries did.

One question that universities with offshore campuses have is how much to penalize a student whose assignment content is good but whose quality of English is poor. Amongst the students surveyed, there was general support for compensating students who have a good understanding of the subject but the inability to express it in good English. One student commented that academic work should be judged on understanding rather than on language.

The questionnaire also revealed that although academic staff felt that the majority of students were able to cope with the course provided, they felt that about 20 per cent were not able to cope and this was largely because of their inadequate English language skills. This lack of language ability became especially evident when the students engaged in some kind of analysis of problems and in understanding of concepts with which they were not familiar. They also confirmed the difference of ability in the use of English between the two groups of students.

An additional problem is that it takes much longer to learn a second language if it is not cognate with the first language (Kirkpatrick & Prescott, 1997). Pe-Pua (1997) in his research amongst international students in Australian universities found that language was inevitably the most difficult problem for many Asian students. For most of them, the major difficulty was in comprehending what the teacher or other students were saying because of the fast speed, lengthy

sentences, different accent/pronunciation, and use of unfamiliar slang and idioms.

When international students find themselves in a classroom with people of diverse cultures and English is the only common language, they face a very difficult task. Different teachers may speak English with different accents and with specialized vocabulary. Reading the textbooks becomes a very difficult and slow task. Listening to the conversation of their classmates is difficult because some students with advanced English skills speak too quickly for them and their language is coloured with colloquialisms. Students from other countries have strange accents and may be equally difficult to communicate with.

Student presentations are often required. Though these are often favoured by Australia-born students, they are difficult for international students, many of whom are very shy as well as having difficulty in understanding the language of the other students. When it comes to class discussion, a method often used in Australian educational circles, the same problems apply.

In writing an assignment, they have difficulty in fully comprehending the question, especially if the language is very complicated. They are then required to consult texts which are again written for fully qualified English speakers and contain specialized vocabulary. They are required to comprehend the texts, sort out the main ideas, transfer them to their own language patterns and then apply them to the question that they have been asked. For many of the students this is an almost impossible task especially in the first couple of years of their studies. Little wonder that they descend to plagiarism.

Another problem that international students face in common with students all over the world is the examination. However, for non-native English speakers facing a long examination in which both questions and answers have to be in English, the problem is more difficult. Not only is there a problem of comprehending the questions and supplying the answers but there is a problem of time constraint. Usually one is much slower writing in a foreign language. If non-native speakers have the same time for the examination as native speakers, they are up against a considerable hurdle. Some more radical critics have even suggested that international students should be allowed to do the examination in what they consider to be their best language. However, this presents immediate obvious problems of equity. Another approach is to 'go easy' on language errors for some assessment items provided that the depth of thinking is appropriate to the assessment task. Care

needs to be taken to ensure that assessment instructions are clear and unambiguous.

Offshore campuses obviously need to have clear language policies. First they should be certain about the level of English they require for incoming students. If they decide to err on the side of generosity on this point, they need to have a well-established English support system operating in the campus. They also need to consider the possibility of flexibility in terms of language skills expected of students who cope well with the content of their studies, but have poorer language skills. Offshore campuses could well consider other modifications to cope with problems of language without lowering academic standards within the campus.

### **FEATURES MAKING AN OFFSHORE CAMPUS MORE SUSTAINABLE**

The four fundamental academic issues discussed above apply to anyone who studies in an offshore campus in their own country. However, they do not face the problems of those who study in a foreign country. These problems may include coping with a different life-style and customs, eating different food, overcoming loneliness and homesickness, facing racial discrimination, enduring unusual climatic conditions and all the problems that any foreigner faces when he/she chooses to leave their own country and live overseas. It could be that some of these features, combined with the rising living standards in Asian countries (Love, Kamener, von Oertzen, & Minifie, 2012.), are the reasons why the number of international students desiring to enter Australian universities in Australia appears to have reached its peak. In 2005, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia asserted that the market then demanded greater offshore participation by Australian institutions (Armitage, 2005). In today's higher educational sphere, such offshore participation by Australian institutions has become a very important factor in the internationalisation of many universities (Feast & Bretag 2005; Murray, 2011). Offshore campuses are now driving the growth in international student numbers (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011; Banks, Kevat, Ziguras, Ciccarelli & Clayton, 2010).

### **CONCLUSION**

The internationalization of higher education has resulted in offshore education now being part of many universities' mainstream activities. Therefore, universities are bound to divert a reasonable portion of their resources and their energies to the creation of establishing effective offshore ventures.

One of the first issues that must be assured is that the curriculum offered by the parent university should be

relevant to the students' needs. If there is no provision made for local content in the course, then the parent university needs to ensure that their teaching staff members create ways and means of making the curriculum relevant to the students' situation. It is important that those initiating the offshore education and those working in it be culturally sensitive. Teaching students of a different culture requires people who are sensitive and adaptable. It also requires academic staff who are prepared to research the pedagogy used to achieve the most effective delivery of material required by the curriculum. A major focus in educating students in such an offshore venture is to ensure that students are enabled to be competent in the use of language skills appropriate to the course.

If the future of Australia's participation in international education continues to lie in the provision of offshore education rather than educating international students here in Australia, universities need to give much thought to the ways in which they can better provide education with a quality that will ensure its effectiveness amongst potential students.

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#### Author Note

To protect the anonymity of the institution referred to in the paper, no specific information is provided regarding the location, program, or name of the institutions.

