Offshore/Onshore foundation programs: student perspective

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Abstract
This presentation reports on a study of the educational quality and cultural sensitivity of foundation programs operated by Australian universities.

The initial phase of the project, that involved a literature review and interviews with coordinators, identified two key issues: the quality of education and cultural sensitivity. Quality of education included academic standards of offshore courses and the preparation for the onshore component. Cultural sensitivity involved recognising the presence of acculturation in the educational programs.

The second phase of the project involved a student survey that was designed to investigate: the quality of teaching, educational facilities and assessment; and, the cultural accommodation of teachers, course content and administrative staff. Surveys were administered to, and structured interviews were conducted with, foundation students and graduates from a foundation course who were presently enrolled in a degree program.

Key Words
quality of education, cultural sensitivity, transnational foundation courses, student perspective.

Background to the study

In 1984 the Jackson Report recommended that changes should take place to existing educational programs to meet the requirements of students from developing countries. However, the Report was not explicit in how to set in place appropriate modifications that would ensure educational quality and cultural sensitivity within educational programs for international students. Since 1984 the issue of educational quality and cultural sensitivity from the international students' perspective has remained largely ignored by the literature despite its relevance and importance. The aim of this presentation is to report the findings of a study which looked at:
educational quality; and,
cultural sensitivity,
of transnational foundation programs (preparatory courses), operated by Australian universities from the students' perspective.

This study was conducted in two phases. The initial phase consisted of reviewing the literature and interviewing course coordinators involved with transnational programs. As a result of the findings obtained in the initial phase, a second phase was developed which focussed on determining the perceptions of enrolled international students. Students studying both offshore and onshore were surveyed and interviewed in order to obtain data from the student's perspective.

Literature review

From a review of the relevant literature the important issues were found to be academic standards offshore, offshore partners, culturally appropriate teaching strategies, curriculum incorporating local customs and student learning styles.

Academic standards offshore

In 1997, Marginson predicted that a compromise to educational standards would proliferate if the growing trend towards commercialisation of educational programs in higher education should persist. In 1998 Coaldrake and Stedman reported on a possible deterioration to the quality of Australia's international programs "due to commercialisation, internationalisation" and globalisation of courses.

… lowering costs in any area of endeavour is usually possible by compromising quality (Coaldrake and Stedman p. 10).

This threat to quality delivery has been reported by Williams (1989), Wells (1993), McNamara and Harris (1997), Marginson (1997).

Offshore partners
The many private partners active in offshore programs are not educational organizations, but business enterprises. This gives rise to an odd situation for Australian universities, since it is possible for their overseas partner organisation to be bought and sold like any other business commodity, with a consequential change of its entire educational policy.

To maximise their returns, partners will usually press for large enrolment of students without due regard for maintaining the entry standards deemed necessary for acceptance into Australian degree programs. Partners' common desire to maximise student completions have led Australian universities to develop elaborate schemes to ensure that standards of assessment are maintained.

In some cases, the same partner organisation serves similar courses offered by several universities. (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1995)

Culturally appropriate teaching strategies
The AV-CC's Code reflects a cultural model of acculturation (Davis and Olsen 1999 p. 99).

Davis and Olsen (1999) have defined acculturation as services "provided to international students to enable them to overcome their deficiencies and problems". They cite the following reference from the AV-CC (1999 8.4) to support their argument that the AV-CC Code of Ethical Practice for international students recommends a policy of acculturation: "international students, to maintain standards of academic excellence, need to adapt to the dominant culture, that is, promot[ing] the successful adjustment by international student to life and study at any Australian university, within Australia or overseas".

We must not violate the private and deeply emotional identification of our students by insisting that they value what we value and share our culturally acquired attitudes (Rivers 1983 p. 149).

Curriculum incorporating local customs
The study of Davis, Olsen and Bohm (2000) found that there was significant adaptation to the curriculum for the delivery of the award offshore in only 28% of 82 offshore programs. It is important "to understand the local environment and tailor the course by using local examples and concepts" . The local law often stipulates essential requirements in such courses, for example, with respect to the major language, ethics and morality. Alexander and Rizvi (1993) have expressed concern that "cultural sensitivity within curriculum and teaching methods: need to be actualised in offshore programs."

For the majority, there is **NO** evidence of the curricula being adapted to suit the culture, religious or economic circumstances of the country in which the courses are offered (Wells 1993) [word in bold and upper case by Wells].

In addition, curriculum incorporating local customs has been largely ignored by the literature.

The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of these issues.

Phase one: interviews with course coordinators

Information was gathered onshore from Australian universities for relevant courses currently offered (or previously available). The information included: course duration, organisational structure, discipline, country of offering, associated regional educational body, study characteristics, contact persons, promotional material and other student information.

A number of issues were identified from this study.

Academic standards in offshore programs should be maintained
Various respondents expressed the opinion that an influential factor in Australian universities gaining a place in the education export industry, was the good reputation of their degree programs in terms of quality academic content, teaching staff and facilities. Therefore, retaining these characteristics offshore was essential. This was particularly so in relation to partners' desire to discount the need for enforcing English standards. As a result, it was essential to check that the standards (academic and English) of students that were being accepted were those that had been agreed upon with the partner. Any perceived lowering of quality of teaching or perceived ethical breach in examination and assessment could tarnish the reputation of Australian universities. Upholding standards is especially important for the offshore components of twinning courses. Here, should students fail in the second part of their course, taking in Australia, the odium is not associated with the overseas partner but with the university onshore.

The relationship with overseas partners was difficult in that the interest of partners tended to be financially rather educationally motivated
The general impression gained from respondents to this study was that most problems arose from the partners themselves and their attempts to maximise profits. The lack of cooperation and communication by Australian universities about their arrangements is exacerbated by the overseas partners, whose methods of operation tend to be covert, stemming from their own intense competition. Problems could (and did) arise if the same partner serviced similar courses for several universities, for which programs did not insist on the same entry standards. Variable entry requirements were common knowledge amongst offshore students. Widespread problems in maintaining entry standards of students stemmed from the involvement of the overseas partner in selection of students and the competition between rival colleges.

Universities should consider carefully the suitability of curriculum and teaching methods to respect students' cultural and educational background
Interestingly, adopting teaching approaches to meet the needs of the students within their own cultural background brings with it a new set of issues for maintenance of standards. Initially, courses tended to be taught in the same manner, both offshore and in Australia. Now there are increasing occurrences where adapting pedagogy has led to different teaching and learning methods being used for the same course, offshore compared with those in Australia.

Recognition and accommodation of cultural differences are essential to the success of offshore courses
Recognition, respect and accommodation of cultural differences by both the universities and their international students are essential to the success of offshore courses and especially those involving twinning segments. It is important to understand the local government and tailor the course by using local examples and concepts. Institutions should recognise their responsibilities for taking appropriate account of the potential cultural and linguistic difficulties international students may encounter.

Foundation courses should contain transition methodology from a structured teacher centred educational environment to the highly participative student centred one
At the beginning of their studies, students benefit from the provision of a familiar, structured teaching environment. This is met through scheduling organised work in regular classes, such as long tutorial classes even where lectures may have been presented over a short period by intensive block mode.

Then, through the use of teaching approaches that build students' skills in student centred learning, the classroom experience gradually moves to that more typical of the Australian campus. This transformation methodology is most important in preparation offshore students intending to continue with a twinning component. (Cobbin, Logan and Cox 1999).

These five issues outlined above can be consolidated into two key issues:
quality of education – this involved standards of offshore courses and the preparation for the onshore component; and,
cultural sensitivity – this involved recognising the presence of acculturation in the educational programs.

Phase two: student surveys

The information collected in the initial phase was used in the development of a comprehensive survey and interview schedule for students.

The second phase of the project consisted of a student survey which was designed to investigate:
the quality of teaching, educational facilities and assessment; and,
the cultural accommodation of teachers and administrative staff.

The questions in the survey were concerned with: preparation for Australian tertiary courses, reasons for choosing the place of study, quality of teaching, quality of teaching facilities, quality of library facilities, use of English for lectures, appropriateness of teaching and assessment methods, acceptance of cultural background, institutional concern for student welfare, use of student services, appropriateness of learning assistance, potential problems. The items in the survey used a five point Likert scale.

The student survey and interview schedule were administered to six different groups of students (three offshore, three onshore). These groups included foundation students in their first and second semesters and students who had graduated from a foundation course and were currently enrolled in a degree program. Where possible the survey and interview were timed to coincide mid-semester for both offshore and onshore students. Overall 345 students were surveyed. They were associated with six universities in four states in both urban and rural areas.

A factor analysis of the responses resulted in three underlying factors: teaching quality, cultural sensitivity and student welfare. From these factors, five parameters were generated and investigated, three related to teaching quality: quality of teaching, quality of facilities, the quality of assessments and two related to cultural sensitivity: cultural accommodation of teachers and cultural accommodation of administrative staff. The results from related questions in the survey were added together to obtain a mean for each student on that factor. A median, mean and standard deviation were calculated for students in each group.

The data obtained from the student surveys were analysed using Statview® SE+ Graphics, Microsoft Excel® and SPSS® programs. Median, mean, standard deviation were calculated and the Mann Whitney U test® were used. Statistical significance was reported at $p < 0.05$.

Results of student surveys

The survey data were analysed and the median, mean and standard deviation presented in Table 1. [Groups 1, 2 and 3 are 1st semester Foundation, 2nd semester Foundation and Degree - offshore, and Groups 4, 5 and 6 are respectively the same courses - onshore. QOT is the quality of teaching, QOF the quality of facilities, QOA the quality of assessments, CAT the cultural accommodation of teachers and CAA the cultural accommodation of administrative staff.]

Table 1   Median, mean and standard deviation of survey parameters

	Quality of Teaching	Quality of Facilities	Quality of Assessment	Cultural Accommodation of Teachers	Cultural Accommodation of Admin Staff
	QOT	QOF	QOA	CAT	CAA
Group 1 (n=40)	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.8	3.7
Foundation 1	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.8	3.6
offshore	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.6	1.1
Group 2 (n =62)	3.7	3.3	3.0	3.3	3.3
Foundation 2	3.7	3.3	3.4	3.3	3.3
offshore	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.7
Group 3 (n =81)	3.7	3.5	3.0	3.3	3.0
Degree	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.3	3.2
offshore	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.9
Group 4 (n=104)	4.0	4.0	3.5	3.8	3.7
Foundation 1	4.1	3.9	3.6	3.7	3.2
offshore	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.2
Group 5 (n = 17)	3.7	3.8	3.5	3.6	2.3
Foundation 2	3.7	3.8	3.5	3.4	2.7
offshore	0.6	0.7	0.4	0.7	1.1
Group 6 (n = 41)	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.7
Degree	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.6	3.3
offshore	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	1.0

Comparing groups 1 and 4, 3 and 6 and all offshore/all onshore students, a number of significant results were obtained.

Comparing all students offshore with all students onshore, all parameters scored significantly higher onshore than offshore (QOT , QOF, QOA, CAT - in all cases $p \leq 0.001$), except the non significant responses for the cultural accommodation of administrative staff (CAA):.

Comparing groups 1 and 4, the quality of teaching (QOT) is the only parameter that is significantly different (at a $p < 0.05$ level) with Group 4 higher than Group 1.   For groups 3 and 6, scores for the quality of assessment (QOA) ($p \leq 0.001$) and the cultural accommodation of teachers (CAT) ($p < 0.05$) are significantly higher onshore than offshore.

Quality of Teaching
Even though overall, students rated onshore teaching higher than offshore teaching, students (in groups 3 and 6) rated the quality of teaching higher in the offshore component of the twinning program than in the onshore component.

Quality of Facilities
A visit to the offshore colleges in South-East Asia, reinforces all the comments from the initial phase of the study. The campuses have very little free space, often bordered by campuses of competing colleges. The classrooms seem very cramped. Computers were a little antiquated; some were out-of-order and seemingly inadequate to cope with the large number of students, who waited in long lines in

the corridors for a free functioning computer. The need for more computers was often mentioned in the student interviews with offshore students, especially with the group 1 students.

The students in groups 3 and 6 rated the quality of the overall facilities (with a library component included) much the same. As to the question of whether there were sufficient books in the library only 24% of the offshore students thought there were (compared to 58% onshore). This question scored significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) for the onshore students.

The colleges were often located on main roads or semi-main roads with continuous traffic noises and very loud sales pitches from close-by department stores and shops. Surprisingly, 63% of offshore students said that they had no trouble with the outside noise.

Quality of Assessment

An important consideration arising from the initial phase of this study was that maintaining academic standards offshore was very important to teaching staff. When interviewed students agreed and the international recognition of the offshore partner's college was the most frequent concern reported by the offshore interviewees.

Other Issues

Although international reputation was the main concern, offshore students complained of inadequate computer facilities, few sporting facilities, and low respect for students whereas the corresponding students onshore complained of public transport issues, inadequate computer facilities and low respect for students.

Near the front gate of many offshore colleges, there are the offices of a large number of different agents. Unlike onshore students, offshore students can readily change from one Australian university to another or in fact have the choice of many overseas universities. Offshore interviewees (70%) and onshore interviewees (37%) claimed that they did not have their expectations met with their course. Yet surprisingly, 87% of offshore students and 94% of onshore students would recommend their campus to other students, friends, relatives and parents.

The students in Group 6 consist of a mix of twinning students studying with different onshore universities. It was reported by one of the onshore Business Faculties that students from their offshore partner, coming from a college similar to that described in this section, performed better than all other students in their course. So the concerns about inferior teaching, academic standards, and preparation offshore, are perhaps a little misplaced.

From the information obtained from the student interviews, two key issues were identified: the international reputation of the college; and, the lack of respect shown to students by staff.

An explanation for what may appear paradoxical from the data collected, may be explained by students (twinning) themselves :

"Our offshore college was only interested in getting us finished as quickly as possible and off to Australia".

"In our country, we learn to adapt - it's a way of life. For example, we sometimes [have to] change language during conversations [with friends] mid-sentence in my country, so adapting is something that we get used to".

 "It doesn't matter about noise and cramped classrooms or transition methodology, what [does] matter to us is student respect and more functioning computers."

The survey and the student interviews have shown that the student perspectives are different to those of the onshore coordinators. The facilities offshore may be poor, but the important concerns for the

students are the quality of the teaching, the international reputation of the college and the respect given to students.

Conclusion

The offshore partner was reported to be the major stumbling block in offshore educational programs. It was reported that entry requirements between partners were flexible and non-standardised both internally and externally. Educational staff reported that they feared that, every time the contract between the onshore university and the partner came up for review, the entry requirements would be further eroded, however small. Educational staff were aware of inferior facilities and embarrassed especially after they talked to visiting teaching staff from the onshore university. Offshore staff felt helpless to improve the facilities and felt helpless to regulate the entry requirements. Even though library insufficiencies and insufficient sports facilities were a concern to offshore educational staff, staff felt strongly about maintaining academic standards and entry requirements which they thought should be the same without exception to the onshore university.

The second factor of importance in the initial phase was the cultural sensitivity of the courses: whether cultural differences were recognised; teaching methods and assessment made appropriate; and, students adequately prepared for Australian universities.

The students perceived the quality of teaching, the quality of facilities and the cultural accommodation of teaching staff as slightly better onshore than offshore. The quality of facilities such as the sufficiency of books in the library were also perceived better onshore than offshore.

Even though the quality of facilities offshore appeared inferior to those onshore such as classrooms appeared smaller, lack of sports facilities and outside noise became intolerable at times, most students reported that they would recommend the offshore college to others.

Overall, it would appear that the courses surveyed are meeting the needs of the students. They are providing quality education and adequate preparation for the Australian component of their course judging by the perspective of the students and their subsequent performance in Australia.

Recommendations arising from this study are as follows:

- The quality of the teaching must be the paramount consideration.

- The international reputation of the course is very important, and this means that the quality control should be internally and externally maintained.

- Poor facilities, although unfortunate, can be adapted to by students. However, computer and library facilities should be continually monitored.

- The lack of respect shown to students by staff, particularly administrative staff, is also of concern. This needs to be further investigated. It would appear that it is not specifically respect for their culture, but respect for them as people.

- Although the courses surveyed appear to be meeting the needs of the students, the issues raised in the initial phase of this study need to be continually monitored, so that the standards do not decline in the future, due to an emphasis on the quantity of students rather than their quality.

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