

Faculty of Arts
Faculty of Arts - Papers

University of Wollongong

Year 2004

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This is an electronic version of an article published as: Castle, RG and Kelly, DJ, International Education: quality assurance and standards in offshore teaching: exemplars and problems, Quality in Higher Education, 10(1), April 2004, 51-57. This article is available online here.

This paper is posted at Research Online.

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International Education: quality assurance and standards in offshore teaching: exemplars and problems

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ABSTRACT

The massification of university education is being replicated in many emergent and newly-industrialised countries, as universities from older economies have begun to offer educational services overseas. Initially, these were small-group programmes, but in recent years many more subjects, programmes and degrees have been taught offshore to increasingly large groups. This kind of education is dissimilar both to distance education and to local (campus) education, and provides particular challenges for those ensuring and assuring quality from a global perspective. Drawing on the significant experience of the authors, this paper takes a case-study approach to investigating the principles and processes of assuring quality and ensuring standards and to identifying elements that can prove fruitful in achieving high quality and standards.

Introduction

In the 1990s, Australia was in the vanguard of offshore and international education, especially in Asia. Rapid growth characterised that first phase, which was enabled by proximity to Asia and the widespread uptake of information and internet technology (Scott, 1998; Gallagher, 2002a, 2002b).

However, as increasing numbers of institutions became involved in offshore education, including large numbers of private providers, closer focus has been given by many universities to quality assurance processes, including parity with on-campus courses. This closer focus on apt and thorough-going quality assurance processes could be identified as a new phase of offshore education. That does not mean that quality assurance has not always been a central aspect of offshore teaching. Rather, as quality assurance has become more an essential strategy in higher education, many universities have given close attention to aptness of quality assurance for offshore programmes (Avdjieva & Wilson, 2002).

The following identifies and discusses the role and practice of quality assurance in offshore higher education programmes, taking account of the changing international context for higher education. After brief reviews of quality assurance issues that are most apposite to offshore education, and to the University of Wollongong, which is the focus of this case study, the emphasis

will be on quality assurance procedural and policy issues for courses based offshore. The conclusion will discuss likely challenges in assuring quality and ensuring standards in offshore higher education.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Offshore

In 1999, Van Damme deplored the lack of literature on quality assurance for offshore programmes, arguing that 'nowadays internationalisation and quality assurance are two separate fields of action in higher education' (Van Damme, 1999, p. 30). While the gap has narrowed considerably in the last few years, the literature on quality assurance principles and processes for offshore education is still piecemeal.

Yet, just as the massification of higher education generated issues of quality assurance and standards, so the rapid increases in offshore education have highlighted the importance of assuring quality systematically beyond the home campus (Scott, 1998). There are four central issues within the extensive quality literature that are most germane to offshore teaching; yet none of these four issues is straightforward.

They are:

1. The differentiation between standards and quality.
2. The level of importance given to external accreditation as the means of measuring and assuring quality.
3. The relative significance ascribed to cultural and language contexts, especially as these relate to students' approaches to learning.
4. The relative importance ascribed to curriculum and subject delivery as against all aspects of delivering education.

In part, the softness of the literature on these terms reflects the definitional issues of what quality is and how it can be measured (Woodhouse, 1996; Yin and Wai, 1997). Further definitional debate arises in understanding the nature of quality in comparison to the notion of standards. In discussing these issues, Yorke (1999), drawing on International Standards Organisation (ISO) literature, claims that 'quality' refers to 'the totality of features and characteristics of a product that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs'. There are obvious difficulties with this definition. These include the dependence on satisficing rather than aiming for excellence, and the looseness of the terminology where the provider *infers* needs rather than *implies* them. Nevertheless, the notion that

quality assurance refers to all the aspects of the education delivery becomes very important for offshore programmes (QAAHE, 1999; Harman & Meek, 2000).

By contrast, then, the term 'standards' can be seen in much narrower terms on the expectations set for the students' understanding and performance in the subjects within a programme (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 1995; Van Damme, 1999; Yorke, 1999; Harvey, 2002; Laugharne, 2002).

Concerns about 'standards', rather than quality, have led, for example, to higher education institutions using and relying on external accreditation. Yet, while still not widely discussed in the context of offshore education, external accreditation has nevertheless been given importance by some who have relied on its value in sustaining claims of superior education (Van Damme, 1999). This notion derives from the view that external review is superior to internal review and not likely to be subject to local self-interest. In this respect, one form of external accreditation which is not well-appreciated in assuring quality in offshore education is the role of offshore education authorities. A high proportion of offshore programmes cannot be taught (or at least registered) until they meet the requirements of education authorities in local, provincial or national governments. In evaluating these programmes to ensure they meet local needs, the offshore authority is thus often subjecting the programme to accreditation-like scrutiny.

However, the most common method of external accreditation has been that given by professional bodies, such as engineering, accounting and information technology. These have been especially popular with students in offshore courses, since completion of a recognised course provides students with professional accreditation. Yet, neither popularity nor business recognition will assure quality and ensure standards of education. There is clearly an intersection between the courses offered and the business and professional needs in a particular area but that is not synonymous with quality education (Yorke, 1999).

In recent years, several external accreditation structures have been developed. These include the plurinational accrediting organisation, GATE, which takes aptness to business interests as the basis for measuring quality, and the broad university agglomerations such as Universitas 21, which claim that the internal benchmarking process provides putative external accreditation of all members of the consortium.

The primary issues of quality assurance in offshore education, therefore, focus on the totality of the student experience and the need to measure the whole

programme, rather than the academic experience in its narrowest form. A beautifully designed and delivered approach which is inefficiently administered or inappropriately resourced will neither assure quality nor ensure standards (Gallagher, 2002a, 2002b).

Overlaid on these kinds of issues are the difficulties of defining and measuring standards, including the significance of using a measure such as parity with on-campus offerings. For some, parity and benchmarking are assumed to require standardisation. Yet in the context of offshore delivery, where learning styles, resources and structures may be different to on-campus delivery, standardisation could even reduce quality (Biggs, 1999; CHSE, 2002).

These issues provide a challenge for those designing offshore programmes that not only aim to recognise cultural and geographical diversity but also seek to ensure consistency in quality and standards in degrees that are offered in multiple locations. The following case study analyses how the University of Wollongong has approached these issues in its offshore teaching.

Case Study

The University of Wollongong is a highly-ranked, medium-sized university in New South Wales. The main campus is 50 miles (80 km) south of Sydney. The university is a little over 50 years old and has 15,000 students studying in most disciplines at undergraduate, postgraduate coursework, and research levels. The university has several major research centres and a strong research profile, which is balanced by a long-term commitment to a high-quality teaching and learning environment. For example, the university was the first in Australia to define graduate attributes for all of its graduates, a core aspect of quality assurance in higher education.

A review of the University of Wollongong policies reveals important features about offshore provision, such as the policy that the only language of instruction is English, and all degrees offered offshore are also offered on campus. Given the centrality of quality assurance to higher education in Australia, the paralleling of courses on campus and offshore expedites and eases the transfer of quality assurance processes to offshore delivery. Moreover, these kinds of policies ensure transparency and accountability in practices and procedures. The core principles and processes of Wollongong's quality assurance for offshore delivery are reviewed below.

Processes for Quality Assurance

The actual process of delivery of courses and subjects offshore has involved a number of procedural and policy issues, all of which have implications for quality assurance. These can be grouped into three main categories: pre-delivery issues; delivery issues; and outcomes.

Pre-delivery Issues

The first decision is whether to operate independently or with a partner. Independence may simplify the quality assurance associated with delivery but there are significant costs in establishing a presence and in navigating the local regulatory environment. This has meant that, in the majority of cases in Asia, Western universities have preferred to work with local partners. Depending on the country, these can be either public institutions or private companies. In the latter case, due diligence about the reputation and capacity of a prospective partner is crucial. Education experience is usually a critical test, as this gives the best picture of capacity to support delivery and to navigate the local regulatory environment. A local partner can also advise on cultural sensitivities and local market issues. A partner may or may not have qualified full-time staff but it is crucial that selection of any local teaching staff to support the programme remain with the home institution (Craft, 2003).

Student selection and admission is another vital area for quality control. Entry standards should be similar to the main campus, including language requirements and prior academic achievement. Experience in admission of international students to onshore programmes assists greatly, although it may be necessary to fine-tune admission standards after evaluating the performance of early cohorts. It requires a high degree of trust to delegate admission to a local partner and this should only occur when a strong working relationship has been established.

Delivery Issues

Offshore delivery can be done in a variety of ways. The 1- or 2-hourly lectures per week, which still dominate on-campus teaching, will be the exception. If staff are to fly in, then the programme will need to be delivered intensively (in 3–4 hour blocks over a week or weekend) and supplemented by local tutors. Preparation for the visiting lecturer is crucial as is contact after the visit. Distance-education techniques can be used in conjunction with intensive

teaching. This can mean supplementary lectures with a web-based delivery system for readings, examinations and contact with the lecturer. The use of a flexible delivery platform such as WebCT or Blackboard can increase the resources available to students and bring them on par with students studying on the home campus.

Recent developments in library technology such as on-line journals, books and databases mean that students anywhere in the world can access material in the main campus library, provided the appropriate electronic access is available to students offshore. There are significant issues of site licences to cover offshore students but these, in our experience, can be negotiated with licence holders. Recent improvements in communication provide opportunities for pedagogically sound courses delivered in mixed-mode or as pure distance subjects, where quality can be assured in ways not possible a few years ago.

Such developments not only benefit offshore students, they can also provide significant improvements in the educational experience for onshore students. Domestic students are increasingly confronted by the need to work during their higher degree course. The need to balance study and work has placed considerable strain on these students (Long & Hayden, 2001). In turn, these new pressures have increased demand for intensively-taught courses and teaching materials that can be flexibly delivered and accessed off-campus. It has not reduced the demand for face-to-face teaching but it has increased the demand for flexible teaching methods.

Marking and return of assignments and examinations is another key area. Prompt return of work to promote feedback to students is crucial and arrangements must be made so that distance does not cause unnecessary delays. In this respect administrative arrangements supporting the academic processes are essential.

Similarly, locally-employed staff may be involved in marking assignments. When this is the case, they will require marking guides, and check-marking processes need to be instituted if uniform standards are to be maintained. Making offshore staff familiar with grade distributions and standards that are common in the home institution is a major challenge as these standards may vary from those in the country of delivery.

Students offshore must have access to appeal processes. This will often require adaptation of practices in the home institution to accommodate offshore

students. Longer timeframes may be needed for appeals to be initiated and the composition of panels for any appeal or disciplinary process will have to be adjusted to meet needs in offshore locations. The aim must be to maintain equity and natural justice for the students. Issues about whose rules apply must also be determined with a partner; this can be a particularly sensitive issue when the offshore partner is a public university with well-developed procedures for its own students. In such cases, hybrid rules may need to be developed and spelled out in the contract.

Outcomes

Constant monitoring and evaluation of outcomes is essential for offshore programmes. Thus, regular reviews of student performance and identification of problem areas are essential. Feedback from staff and students is also critical given the issues that arise from offshore delivery. Regular meetings with offshore partners are essential, where the partners review current programmes and implement improvements that they agree will maintain and advance the quality of design and delivery of programmes. Areas such as enrolment, access to web-based services and speed of return of assessment to students all need constant review. Administrative systems are as important as teaching delivery in ensuring the success of offshore programmes.

Whatever the processes, the core principle is that the home university must be convinced that the standards achieved by students offshore are equivalent to those at its home campus, and that all students, whether onshore or offshore, must feel that they have received a well-delivered course that will be recognised internationally. If these objectives can be achieved, then offshore courses can be a win-win situation but the obstacles should never be underestimated.

The Future

The recent growth in offshore courses has been driven by increased demands for highly skilled workers in developing economies with heavy demands on public resources. Increased demand for university places could not be met financially by governments, nor could local staff provide the range and level of courses required. International institutions have been able to step in to help fill this gap but the questions remain about the long-term future for such programmes, and the future pattern of interaction between supplying universities and the provision of international courses.

One driver that supports arguments that demand for offshore courses will remain high is the continuing, indeed increasing, demand from students for qualifications in English. The spread of globalisation and continuing migration of highly-skilled workers will help to impel this demand.

However, as national education systems in Asia and elsewhere meet student demand for undergraduate education, offshore education demand is likely to be at postgraduate rather than at an undergraduate level.

Offshore providers will need to take into account the changes in the offerings of overseas higher education systems. Thus, partnership models will need to be less 'colonial'. In this respect, it seems likely that initiatives such as joint degrees and highly-articulated programmes of credit transfer such as the 2+2s and 1+1s that the University of Wollongong, *inter alia*, has developed are likely to be the way of the future [1]. These types of courses still require high level quality assurance processes but they present different issues, especially as they place more of the onus on assessment and standards onto local partners.

A university which is focused on and committed to QA will always seek to uphold and assure quality, regardless of the level, form or place of delivery of its programmes. In accrediting or awarding one of its own degrees, a university is presenting true measures of its standards and quality. Those successful in offshore delivery will be those who demonstrate continuity in their scholarship and aptness of teaching, while at the same time convincing the market place that their degree retains its integrity, irrespective of location or mode of delivery. This is the challenge facing all universities engaged in offshore delivery in the 21st century.

Note

[1] The phraseology 2+2 refers to the structure of these newer collaborative programmes where students undertake 2 years of study at their home institution and then 2 years of study at the partner university, just as 1+1 programmes are coursework Masters with students studying a defined and agreed course of study for 1 year in each of the partner institutions.

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