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Offshore university campuses: Bonus or baggage?

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Abstract: Offshore campuses of Australian universities are the face of the Institution in the host country, providing either a strong promotional opportunity, or a quality assurance challenge that can threaten the brand of the parent entity. Attracting, retaining and developing a high quality academic staff to the offshore campus is an essential part of providing a quality program. This paper argues the case for an holistic approach to staff development, that depends on close relationships with the parent's faculty, and a strong commitment to in-house teaching and learning support.

Keywords: Offshore campuses; academic recruiting; staff development; teaching community.

Australian offshore campuses

Offshore campuses of Australian universities are becoming more prevalent, and account for around 33% of all international students enrolled at Australian universities, with the numbers growing. (Auditor General Victoria, 2002).

Most offshore campuses are twinning operations, with a partner organisation in the target country providing the accommodation and using their own staff to teach the Australian degrees along side its own offerings (a model usually referred to as “franchising”). Often students are expected to complete their degree in Australia after a period of study in their home country.

Many twinning operations depend on the academic staff from the parent organisation travelling to the partner campus to teach the courses in intensive mode, with local staff providing the support tutoring. Such reliance on visiting academics is expensive, suits only a limited range of postgraduate programs, can have quality assurance problems, and is difficult to sustain as student numbers grow and the novelty of international travel for the Australian academics wears off (Clark & Clark, 2000).

Twinning arrangements have been popular in countries attempting to use the international linkage to leverage improvements in their own local institutions. As the quality of institutions in a number of Asian countries has risen to compete with the international brands (at least internally), and the number of foreign universities looking for these twinning arrangements has increased, a model with a stronger commitment and greater in-country appeal has been required.

A branch campus approach, where a university in the target country is branded entirely as its parent university, and only teaches degrees conferred by the home organisation, is a relatively new alternative. There is little documentation on their development, and there are few genuine examples (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2002). Australia has become a leader, but this approach to transnational education export is gaining popularity world wide (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2003).

The advantages are significant for both students and universities. Branch campuses offer firmer corporate control, higher local profile, and a way of standing out from the crowd (The observatory on borderless higher education, 2002). Large cohorts of undergraduate students can be enrolled in the “cash cow” programs to generate substantial income. Fees for students can be cheaper than the parent university for the same final degree, as the costs involved in running a branch campus are less than a similar structure in Australia. Students can live in their home culture, with or near their families. More liberal visa requirements in the branch campus host country often allow a wider range of students from other countries to attend, in particular Chinese students in the Asian context, expanding the recruiting field for the parent university to sell its degrees. Also generated is a stream of international students wanting to complete specialisms or post graduate study in Australia.

This rosy prospect has led a number of universities to invest in full branch campuses. Monash University (Monash University Malaysia; Monash University South Africa), RMIT University (RMIT International University Vietnam), and Curtin University (Curtin Sarawak) are three Australian institutions, amongst others, that have taken this path.

Branch campuses hire their own academic staff, under local employment conditions, to teach the programs *in situ*. Visits from the parent university's academics are usually for support and quality assurance, though some teaching is also done depending on the academic model adopted.

In all cases the degrees being offered are touted as identical to those offered in Australia, with the award intended to be indistinguishable to that achieved by those who study in Australia. Course materials and resources are supplied to the branch campus by the parent.

Off-shore campuses trade on the reputation of the parent university – the “Brand”, and in turn contribute to the overall reputation of the entity. Hence quality assurance is a matter of highest priority. As the Auditor General Victoria put it:

“2.163 Where Joint Venture Agreements are entered into, they should be structured so as to empower universities with full control over the academic program and standards. This is crucial for the maintenance of quality control and the minimisation of reputational risk.”

Similarly the respected Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (2002), in its summary of offshore campus activities says, with characteristic British understatement: “The challenge for all branch campuses will be to avoid quality assurance oversights.” In turn, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (2003) regards collaborative offshore arrangements as “particularly challenging”.

Quality assurance offshore

Fallshaw (2003a) summarises a substantial literature on higher education quality to conclude: “There is thus a substantial agreement that quality is defined by fitness for purpose”, though defining exactly what the purpose may be has proved less convergent. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (2003), and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) (2003) both reflect a strong current belief that higher education should be an actively self-regulating, academically autonomous community. This suggests that the “fitness for purpose” can be taken as the educational objectives declared by each higher education institution, as defined in its policy statements, and in the course and unit descriptions it issues.

There are two general approaches used by parent universities to manage the quality of the

programs run offshore. One might be called the “total control” model, and the other the “colleagues in context” model.

Total Control

Many senior university managers believe that quality at a second campus is maintained purely by consistency. To have the same quality as the parent, there must be identical course materials provided in identical ways by the same academics regardless of context. In this model academics from the parent organisation travel to any other campus to teach the same materials they teach in Australia, with identical assessment structures. The local academic staff may provide some tutorial support, and other assistance, but are not allowed to modify the materials in any way, or contribute to the evaluation of the students' performance. The “fitness for purpose” is defined in the definition of the unit, rather than its delivery in a context.

The problems with this model are manifold; theoretically, educationally and administratively, and are well known to educators – particularly those who have participated in them. It can be argued that this model does not provide quality when it is defined as “fitness for purpose”.

Colleagues in context.

This model values the delivery of the education as much as the content. Quality outcomes require quality teaching that responds to the students' prior knowledge, learning requirements, and reasons for studying. Any learning environment is an interaction between teacher, course content, and students. Quality in this view requires that materials and teaching approaches be adapted to suit the different profile of the students in off-shore campuses – in order to achieve the intended learning outcomes with those students. This, in turn, requires that the academics off-shore are capable of doing this, in collaboration with the “brand owners” at the parent campus. In an ideal world the two groups of academics work closely to adapt teaching materials and methods to optimise the learning outcomes declared in the course descriptions. The staff offshore know the students, while those at the parent define the outcomes that constitute the degree. Each context has its own challenges. Each set of academics cannot operate alone. They are colleagues in different contexts.

Quality assurance of a program offshore is thus predicated on having high quality academic staff at both locations, who are capable of collaborating to achieve the required outcomes. The success of an offshore campus thus depends on attracting and retaining high quality academic staff, just as it does for any other university attempting to proclaim itself as of international standard (Altbach, 2003). Academic staff qualifications and experience are also critical measures in the accreditation processes of professional bodies such as the Institution of Engineers Australia (IEAust, 2004). Ensuring that the academic staff teaching a program are well qualified, experienced, and capable in their teaching role is clearly central to the success of any university, on-shore or off-shore.

Students are very clear about the brand of the parent organisation being significant in their choice of university. They see the off-shore campus as part of the parent. No matter what the background organisational structure may be, the success of the branded campus will directly reflect on the parent. Similar standards on similar courses with similar materials in a new context needs high quality staff capable of managing the differences. The skills required to do this well are considerable, and are not quickly gained. Quality assurance requires that these staff skills are not only in place, but can be demonstrated to be so come audit time, which means having an established process with verifiable stages and outcomes. A whole of campus approach is required.

This paper draws on the Author's experience as Director Teaching and Learning at RMIT International University in Vietnam (during which time a AUQA audit was conducted), and with the Sarawak Campus of Curtin University as Associate Dean, where academic staff at the campus were individually interviewed over an extended visit intended to establish the critical factors in teaching quality. It elaborates some of the specific challenges faced in gaining and sustaining a high quality academic staff. This has been broken down in to attracting, retaining and developing academic staff, though (as in most things educational) there is considerable interrelationship between them.

Academic staff profile in offshore campuses

Academic staff in off-shore campuses of Australian universities are of surprising diversity. Contrary to expectation of the parent institution, barely a third are nationals of the host country, and have often arrived via Australian post-graduate degrees; even less are Australian; while the bulk of recruits come from an extraordinarily wide range of countries.

While salaries paid offshore are lower than Australian scales, they are usually considerably more than the comparable local university system offerings. Despite this, the combination of accumulated benefits, job security, opportunities for support in gaining higher degree, or the bond associated with the home institution, means that few local academics make the transition to the Australian off-shore campus from the local university system.

The majority of academic staff who join off-shore campuses have never held an academic position at a university before, though are well qualified in their area of expertise. Some may have taught at colleges, or tutored while studying higher degrees, but many have made a complete career change for reasons as unique as the individual. Most are young. Knowledge of the operation of a university as a business and an institution, and the role of a university academic within it, is limited.

The more senior academics have either spent many years in teaching colleges, or other institutions with little research activity, or come from universities in countries without strong academic reputations, or suffering political or social upheaval. Research expertise is very unusual, and in the early stages of development of the campus, no advantage in recruitment.

Attracting academic staff

Why do they apply to off-shore campuses? Within the diversity of the staff it is difficult to make specific rules, but some common themes exist:

When interviewed, one of the first reasons given for applying for an academic position is job security. Academic life does not pay particularly well, by comparison to industry, but the security of tenure is attractive. This is particularly true of the staff who have had some previous experience at a university, as it has often been as an insecure sessional or part time tutor.

For some the salary offered is good, but for those with previous university experience the off-shore salary package is disappointing. However, this is moderated by low living costs in the host country.

The other most quoted reason for applying to an off-shore campus is opportunity. Off-shore campuses offer an opportunity to get into the main stream of university life, when full time academic positions are in very short supply and fiercely contested in Australia, and other recognised academic countries. Many see a position in an off-shore campus as being a

stepping stone to a position in a more “mainstream” university, and an opportunity to develop relevant skills and experience. Intended growth of student numbers, and the lack of senior staff, also suggests opportunities for promotion are greater at an off-shore campus.

Opportunity to engage in research as part of the job requirements is also highly valued. Young graduates of research degrees are keen to continue their research, while those with some previous research experience are hoping for more flexibility to develop their own interests. For those with some prior university experience, the opportunity to take a greater role in leadership or development of a research area is attractive. Such expectations are not always met, however.

In many cultures university academics have very high social status, giving prestige in the family and beyond.

However, few mention an intrinsic interest in teaching young people. Formal teaching qualifications, or specific interest in teaching as a vocation is rarely mentioned as a reason for applying, even though teaching dominates their workload. Despite this, once established, many of the young academics find the teaching and learning interaction with the students becomes a significant factor in their job satisfaction.

From the perspective of the new academic, there are few sources of reliable information about an offshore campus and academic life there. As previously noted, offshore campuses are a relatively new innovation, and there is little available information in the formal literature that might inform prospective employees. Offshore campus websites tend not to be comprehensive, more constructed as a marketing tool for student recruitment than an integral part of university operations that can provide insights into its culture.

Brand reputation of the parent university carries some weight, while word of mouth from those already employed is quite a common way of knowing about working conditions. Position descriptions and other formal documents are not well detailed, and reference the parent organisation's policies and regulations, even though these are not easily applied to the offshore context. As many new staff are recruited internationally, with phone interviews, there is little opportunity to get first hand experience of the work place, or talk to other staff.

Recruiting is thus often based on appealing to the imagination of the applicant, rather than a comprehensive outlining of information and conditions. It is only when new staff arrive to take up their positions that they find out what they have signed up to.

Recruiting is always a challenge for the management of an offshore campus, as staffing numbers are often finalised late and are constantly increasing to cope with accumulating student numbers. In their eagerness to attract well qualified staff, universities are reluctant to discourage applicants who have idealistic expectations, when their skills are sorely needed. Simply filling the roster is a relief. The further needs of the new academics are easily overlooked as attention moves to the next recruiting need.

Retaining staff

The greatest challenge to retaining academic staff is disillusionment. Expectations are often well separated from the reality of their job. On the other hand, there are unexpected benefits that help moderate disappointments.

When asked why they stay, the academic staff tend to quote the camaraderie and community of their colleagues as very important, as is the sometimes unexpected pleasure gained from the students' engagement with their teaching.

Disappointments include a perception of “second class citizenship” when compared to the staff at the parent university; lack of career structure and promotion opportunity; limited research options and support; heavy workload; uncertainty about their own status; inconsistent application of policies; and unhappiness with management communication and transparency.

Given the pleasure the staff express gaining from the teaching role, it is not surprising that they are particularly hurt by any loss of authority they experience due to the dominance of academics from the parent organisation. If assessment is generated and marked at the parent university, the offshore students quickly see the local academic as powerless and to some extent irrelevant in the grade they achieve. This breaks the teaching and learning connection, and leaves the local academic fewer options for engaging the students in active learning or developing new teaching strategies.

Young and/or inexperienced staff are looking for mentors and guidance to help them understand the requirements of their new roles and plan careers, but with the limited number of senior academics this can prove difficult to arrange. It also puts a strain on the senior academics, who have their own difficulties to deal with already.

Senior staff have problems with the structure of the relationship with the parent university. As most off-shore campuses have some degree of the “total control” model in place, the senior academics are frustrated by the lack of power they have to modify, adapt and develop the courses they teach to suit their students, their context, and to reflect their own interests and expertise. The lack of authority can be a serious blow to the ego, as well as a limitation of their professional development.

Developing staff

Quality assurance of programs depends heavily on having a demonstrable program of staff development to meet the many specific issues facing an off-shore campus. Attracting and retaining quality staff will depend on their perception of the job before, during, and after recruiting.

The diversity of backgrounds of the academic staff creates its own problems, as Australian universities put a high priority on active participation by students in their learning. Teaching for student participation, that leads to an informed opinion being expressed, is very different to the model of many other cultures, where the teacher is expected to provide infallible information to a relatively passive and receptive student who then repeats the information in exams. Particularly when the parent university takes a “total control” approach, there can be a serious misconnection between the materials and assessments provided, and the teaching and learning skills of the local staff and students respectively.

There is a pressing need for the academic staff in an off-shore university to be inducted into the teaching and learning model of the parent university, with ongoing support in developing the skills required to not only teach in an appropriate way, but help the students develop the learning skills to cope with this Australian approach. Courses created for the aggressive style of Australian students are often misunderstood by students from Confucian histories.

The Colleagues in Context model places great responsibility on the offshore academics, and

in the long run reduces the demands on the onshore staff. However, like any new colleagues, the offshore staff need to be part of the same process of engagement with the general faculty of the parent university that a local appointment would, with the extra challenge of geographic separation thrown in. They need to reconceptualise their own understand of the teacher's role as an individual (Fullen, 1991), but also their role within the greater entity of the university. This requires input of time and effort from the parent faculty at a global level. It cannot be left up to the individual relationship between unit controller and local lecturer.

Experience has shown that an holistic approach to teaching and learning development is required in the offshore campus. There are some clear needs:

Statements of roles and responsibilities.

Academics starting in offshore campuses need to know in detail what their conditions and responsibilities are. A ready reference, such as a website, is essential, but some “walking through” of the important aspects of their role in an extended induction is also highly beneficial. The special issues relating to the offshore context need to be identified and the proper procedures laid out. Further mentoring by those more experienced in the workplace can follow. A clear explanation of the appraisal and development schemes should be included.

Building an academic community.

Good collegial relations are not only important in retaining staff, but the development of a reflective practice groups can dramatically effect teaching outcomes, as well as provide a rich professional development environment (Macdonald, 2001). Reflection on action, and in action (Shon, 1983) is a powerful self-regulatory quality process in any profession, but rarely happens spontaneously. A teaching community (Macdonald and Gunn, 1997) has many dimensions and advantages.

Equally essential is the extension of the community relationship to include colleagues in the parent university. This is advantageous to both parties. Offshore campuses do not have to be parasitic. Modifications made to teaching materials or practices by the offshore academics, in response to the international students' particular needs, are a valuable contribution to the internationalisation of the entire program.

Only through close cooperation can the “brand owners” at the parent campus be sure that the intended program is being taught to standard. Quality assurance demands a whole of process approach, not simply the moderation of final outcomes. The more integrated the offshore campus is to the main QA process, the easier it is to assert and demonstrate equivalence.

A leader in the parent university should take responsibility for the integration of the new faculty offshore into the collective group. A cross-national teaching community is not easy to set up, but can provide wide benefits to both campuses. “Colleagues in contexts” assumes that although staff may be in another country, they are still an integral part of the faculty. Geographic challenges need to be specifically addressed to ensure the integration is real.

Career planning.

As most offshore recruits are new to universities, career path mapping is essential. As with any academic staff, there is a need for a program of appraisal and goal setting that is regularly revisited.

Like any professional, academics need to be clear in their responsibilities, how they are measured, and what criteria are used to decide an acceptable outcome. These cannot be

imposed unilaterally from above, but must be negotiated from a basis of shared understanding of the many dimensions of the job. Staff must set their own goals against objectives if they are to be motivated by them. In turn promotion and other financial rewards should be determined from these agreed criteria.

This requires training of managers to provide appropriate support and guidance.

Teaching and learning support.

As mentioned, the majority of academic staff recruited to offshore campuses have little or no university teaching experience relevant to Australian teaching styles, and so need teaching and learning support and training. Of course, such professional development should be integral to every university academic's professional life, but the unique demands of offshore campuses, make the need even more explicit. Positive experiences with teaching are important in retaining staff, so expenditure in teaching support can be seen as an investment in keeping staff and avoiding the cost of further recruitment.

Offshore campuses are stretched in many directions when first starting up. There are endless areas of financial demand. Teaching and learning support struggles for funding while more concrete resource needs are addressed. This is a serious mistake that has led to damage to the reputations of both the offshore campus and its parent. As the local presence of the parent, the program quality of the offshore campus can be the barometer of perception for the entire university. The Auditor General Victoria's comments on reputational risk, previously quoted, are based in hard-nosed economics. Poor teaching costs money.

Resident expertise in teaching and Learning, with a centrally funded program of staff development to meet the various needs elaborated above, is an investment in success for an offshore university. What is required is an integrated program of information, induction, appraisal, and guided reflection in a professional community, linked to a promotion structure that rewards good teaching and demonstrated quality. Most of all it must be closely linked with the parent faculty.

Conclusion

Offshore campuses of Australian universities have unique quality assurance conditions. The acquiring, retaining and appropriate development of quality academic staff is critical to the provision of a education programs that enhances the overall status of the parent organisation, and achieves the complex goals of their offshore structure. Offshore campuses have a particularly acute need for a global, well planned, integrated teaching and learning development structure as part of a wider staffing strategy. If in place the campus can be a real bonus for the parent organisation, but if neglected the campus can become damaging baggage that is not easily abandoned.

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