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From strategy to implementation in a 'global university'

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Abstract: Australia has witnessed many companies attempt offshore expansion since the twin forces of globalisation and a relatively mature local market tempted CEOs in the late 90s. Investing in new markets may constitute an acceptable business risk with company capital, but what complications are introduced when a 'public' university, with a governing act prescribing its educational mission to a regional and national population, aspires to an international **presence**, not merely international status?

This paper explores the challenges faced by administrators, academic staff, and students. It further considers the implications for curriculum crossing 'borders', professional development for staff, and for educational theories. Monash University provides the 'case', specifically an investigation of how the Faculty of Information Technology implemented the University's 'global strategy' at its domestic, Malaysian and South African campuses over 1998-2005.

Keywords: globalisation of education, internationalisation of the curriculum, academic staff development

Introduction

Academics outside Economics and Marketing departments were slow to grapple with the myriad issues posed by globalisation as it became the dominant paradigm of world trade and information flows during the 1990s. The possible ramifications of 'borderless education' (Cunningham et al., 1998; 2000) were initially linked to the potential for 'corporate' universities to usurp traditional higher education institutions (Meister, 1998), and for technology to replace on-campus education. Some observers also recognised direct links between globalising trends in trade and the drive to commercialise and privatise universities, and warned of the implications for the public good role of the university as an institution (Marginson and Considine, 2000; Altbach, 2004). Knight (2002) in particular has catalogued the potential of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) to subvert national education policies, especially in developing countries.

No industry sector has been unaffected by the flood tide of globalisation, either directly through such mechanisms as part or full ownership of assets in a nation state other than that in which an entity is based, or indirectly, through population flows, and 'outsourcing' of service personnel to countries with lower labour costs. Though Australian universities were quick to exploit the demand for onshore Australian studies in the early 90s, relatively few, at least initially, sought the riskier establishment of an offshore campus. Rarely did an Australian university have a coherent international, let alone 'global' strategy in the 90s. Yet by 2000 IDP Education Australia, and in 2004 the British Council, predicted that Australian and UK universities would soon enrol more students offshore than they would in onshore programs.

In 2000 the Vice Chancellor and several senior managers at Monash recognised that globalisation of higher education was an inevitable outcome of broader globalising trends in 'services': see 'Global Development Framework'

<http://www.monash.edu.au/international/oid/plans/framework/>. The vision was built on an existing Malaysian campus, Monash Malaysia (MM), established in 1998 to cater for demonstrated unmet demand for private education in the country. The strategy seemed a logical expansion of what was Australia's largest university, with a comprehensive distance program already offered offshore, a healthy financial position, and a sound reputation among the research oriented 'Group of Eight'. 'Centres' were subsequently set up in London, and Prato, Italy. The decision to establish Monash South Africa (MSA) was commercially-driven, though management's commitment to the campus is now a component of Monash's social justice mission. Further physical offshore campuses were ruled out in 2006, until the Malaysian and South African campuses become 'mature and self-sustaining' (Prof. Larkins, VC, <http://www.monash.edu.au/news/monashmemo/stories/20060301/vc20060301.html>).

The visions of senior managers are easily promulgated through strategic plans at the institutional level. Implementation of strategies is generally left to middle managers, course convenors, and teaching staff. In most institutions, the operational staff may be unconvinced of the merits of a 'strategy document'; they are often given unrealistic deadlines for the introduction of programs, and are underfunded for the many tasks associated with new student cohorts.

This paper draws on a particular investigation into Information Technology (IT) programs offered across the Australian, Malaysian and South African Monash campuses, to explore local/universal knowledge creation in a degree program. IT, it is often argued, is the most international of disciplines, being a major catalyst for globalisation, in an industry dominated by global giants, and having a technical 'language' which all programmers and manufacturers must speak – the binary system. The investigation team queried the assumptions behind the notion of a 'universal discipline' at the level of teaching practices, the challenges posed by administering degree programs across three countries, and student beliefs about the portability of their qualifications from a 'global university'. We interviewed administrators, teaching and support staff and students in the three countries, via samples of convenience, with some attempt to replicate proportional representation by gender. In all, at MSA we interviewed 20 students, eight academic staff and three support/administrative staff; at MM, 11 students and five academics, and in Australia, five academics and 10 students. We found that in the main, IT teaching staff, and students, believed that IT was indeed a global discipline, and that local culture played little or no role in degree content, or the approach to teaching it. Some MSA staff, and one Australian academic, believed that IT was evolving away from programming, which could be perceived as a 'universal' language, into a more communication and systems-oriented discipline. These staff felt strongly that culture would play a larger role in the discipline in future. While we were unable, on the basis of this research, to detect the influence of local culture in this transnational degree program, we did uncover some of the many challenges faced by operational staff in transnational programs, and student perceptions of the worth of their degree.

The context

A very brief description of the socio-political contexts of the various Monash campuses suggests some of the potential challenges for implementation.

MM was established as a public-private partnership with Sunway Group, in accordance with Malaysian law on education and foreign investment; it occupied part of a site with the existing private provider. It was to cater for lower middle class Malay Chinese who preferred not to send their children overseas, at a time when the government was anxious to prevent

large capital outflows, to encourage graduates to assist in positioning the country for the 'knowledge economy'. Hence IT and Engineering were obvious foundation programs. Enrolment had grown to nearly 2700 in 2005, with a significant international student cohort (20 per cent), mainly from Indonesia, followed by China. A medical school is planned.

Initially, administrators were Australian academics, with mainly local teaching staff, often graduates from Monash Australian campuses. Students have tended to be traditional age school leavers, emerging from secondary school systems characterised by large classes (50+), and a concomitant highly disciplined ethos in which memorisation is a key learning approach. (This contrasts to the small class emphasis of Australian school systems, where discipline is looser, and critical questioning is encouraged.)

MSA commenced teaching in 2001, as a joint private partnership, again a requirement under South African law. Computing was one of the foundation programs. The original target was middle class white students, because the Republic's national policy sought to reverse centuries of discrimination against Blacks via favourable entry criteria to public universities. Several Australian institutions saw this as a business opportunity. Senior administrators were Monash Australian staff; teaching staff were predominantly white South African, or Europeans and Indians with South African industry and teaching experience. Students are predominantly school leavers, from a highly differentiated secondary system marked by large poorly equipped classes in public schools, and by a private elite system (Backhouse, 2004). By 2005, enrolments stood at 800. In 2004, fewer than half the students were South African; the remainder were from other African countries, especially Botswana.

Monash Australia has three main campuses where IT is taught: Clayton, Caulfield and Gippsland. For historical reasons, MM received its program and materials from the Gippsland faculty, where the distance program was designed and taught, while MSA took its syllabus from the Caulfield campus with some Clayton input. IT teaching at Caulfield was already 'international' in terms of the student body, over 50 per cent at the height of the IT boom. Notwithstanding the rapid decline in enrolments consequent on the dotcom crash of 2001, an IT degree was still listed as an 'Occupation in Demand' until 2005, allowing points towards Permanent Residency (PR). (By 2003-4, 45 per cent of PR visas were for IT graduates.) Many tutorial staff are Monash graduates, often former 'international students' and are often also enrolled as postgraduate students. Onshore classes are characterised by higher mature age student numbers than the offshore programs, increasing the complexity of diversity.

Challenges for administrators

Balancing Australia's well-developed quality assurance and accreditation regulations with labour laws (race quotas in South Africa) and national professional association standards in transnational settings poses challenges. For example, the Australian Computing Society has an active educational arm and well-developed standards (see www.acs.org.au), the Malaysian and South African equivalents appear more business orientated. Malaysia's QA system, modelled on Australia's, is emergent; its accreditation criteria include observance of religious-party insistence that all programs include one unit on Islamic Studies for Muslim students, or moral education for non-Muslims. Negotiating triple QA and accreditation procedures has involved multiple documentations, more especially since the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)'s remit was extended to audit of overseas campuses of Australian institutions. To reduce duplication of effort, Monash intends to combine its mandated Higher Education Quality Council of South Africa audit with its AUQA audit in 2006.

Further complicating administration has been the deep resentment of the MSA venture amongst Australian staff. In 2004, the loss was \$25 million, in 2005 a more encouraging \$10 million. With a more altruistic motivation regarding MSA, the University has increased its scholarships, putting further strain on the budget. The drain is perceived as resulting in Australian staff cuts and increased workloads. MSA staff are deeply conscious of the general resentment.

MM, however, is now financially viable, though a capital program, and likely pressure from AUQA to increase the research output in line with that of Australian campuses, so it is not a 'teaching-only' campus, may prove challenging.

The complexity of establishing administrative procedures for three national contexts is astonishing. They must conform with local legal, financial and educational systems. Timetables must recognise national holidays, religious and civil, and Muslim prayer times in Malaysia. Security issues in Johannesburg mean that most staff and students, especially those using public transport to commute long distances, leave the campus well before dark, restricting use of expensive facilities. Relatively poor connectivity plagues campus activities. Time zone differences are a major headache, complicating examination timetabling and curbing telephone and video conferencing. Distances and costs curtail inter-campus visits. Yet wholesale decentralisation of decision making to a local campus is impossible if a university is to maintain its reputation. Nevertheless, the administrative issues are being resolved.

Staff roles in curriculum

Academic staff, however, are still struggling with the implications of transnational programming. There is the vexed question of a common curriculum, necessary at three levels. First, 'a Monash degree' must be 'the same' wherever it is delivered, if the 'brand' is to be protected; second, 'equivalence' is an AUQA requirement, but is ill-defined. Third, efficiency in a multinational enterprise dictates central development of a service/curriculum. For staff, this poses conundrums. Educational theory would argue, from a constructivist perspective, that curriculum decisions should emanate from those closest to the student population. At a simple level, this means designing a curriculum which allows for the fact that many African students may have no prior computer experience. Further, the current IT course has a dominant programming core, where African IT needs are in networking systems and project management. How much variation in curriculum can be allowed?

Another issue relates to the academic role: where curriculum is centrally developed, do 'outlier staff' contribute to that development? This is a major issue for MM and MSA staff (Backhouse, 2004). Individual Australian-based staff have encouraged and expected significant input into program development, but most, if our interviewees are representative, have not. Teaching/learning materials are 'distributed', with distance education materials used in Malaysia, and PowerPoint 'lectures' uploaded onto a unit website several days prior to a scheduled lecture at MSA. Most MSA staff particularly resented their diminished autonomy; two approved thoroughly because it reduced their preparation work. The latter attitude appeared more common among MM staff, who were more research oriented.

Assessment items and marking procedures provoked the most disgruntlement offshore. Some Australian-based convenors requested assignment and examination topics from overseas staff; most did not. Topics and questions were often inappropriate in other contexts – one programming assignment required code to be written for a self-service station fuel pump. Students in MSA had no experience for answering the question, since high unemployment

rates ensure full service re-fuelling is the norm. Learning activities were often culturally inappropriate – an exercise using playing cards, for example, offends strict Muslim law.

Coordinators frequently have little or no knowledge of how ‘their’ material is being used. Widely different practices occur over marking protocols, with some convenors allowing ‘local’ marking, some insisting all examinations be marked ‘in Australia’, and others insisting on moderation of overseas-marked assignments by ‘Australian’ staff. MM and MSA staff inferred from these practices a lack of confidence in their professional skills.

Students' English language difficulties are a major issue for many teaching staff, although this problem is as widespread onshore in Australia as in the offshore campuses. The interviewers expected that at offshore campuses staff might be tempted to teach in a local language to explain complex topics, but in South Africa, staff simply asked ‘which language is ‘local’ here?’. Many students have English as a third or fourth language, and half the students are ‘international’, from elsewhere in Africa. English is the lingua franca at MM as well, since its local students may be from Hindi or a Chinese-language background, while its international students speak Bahasa Indonesian or a Chinese dialect.

For staff then, there are obvious tensions at curriculum, cultural, practical and linguistic levels in a multinational program, and these are difficult to resolve satisfactorily when curriculum and teaching practice decisions are made by individual course coordinators, with no strong institutional guidance.

Students

Given the origins of the research as a project within the Institute for the Study of Global Movements within the broad theme of migration flows as these relate to education, the investigators expected that motivation to enrol at Monash would strongly correlate with the perceived portability of a Monash qualification, and that many would seek to migrate on graduation, or at least seek temporary international employment.

Few MSA students intended to do so, however. Students from other African countries almost unanimously declared their intention to return to their own countries, even those not ‘indentured’ by a national scholarship. White South African students were more inclined to predict that their futures might be overseas, given local labour laws. Black South African students were committed to staying in South Africa. Malaysian local students hoped for overseas careers, while international MM students appeared to want to return to their home countries. Interviewees in Australia itself were adamant that most onshore international students, particularly from China and India, were motivated primarily by the prospect of PR. Several tutors in the Caulfield program had themselves used their Monash IT degree for points to PR.

The investigators had expected that lecturing staff, especially those with experience in teaching in other countries, would have some understanding of. On all campuses, students expressed no comprehension of the concept of ‘learning styles’, or their own preferred approach to learning. Most MM and Australian-based staff believed their overseas students were rote learners, unused to critical thinking, and reluctant to speak in class, but they rarely related these observations to learning preferences. All students chose Monash because it had ‘global recognition’ as a good university so their qualifications would be recognised anywhere. For students at the offshore campuses, the major problem was a lack of facilities, particularly IT. Ensuring parity of facilities is obviously a major challenge for offshore

activities of any university. Few students expressed interest in collaborating with students at other Monash campuses, although one lecturer at MM had attempted to construct a joint project. For most students, the Monash 'brand' was a positive in terms of degree recognition and portability of qualifications, although limited local resources troubled them. Their frustrations stemmed from access to online resources.

Implications for curriculum

Our research revealed the complexities involved in any simple rendering of the current Australian push to 'internationalise curriculum'. Rigid insistence on a 'common curriculum' clearly inhibits the application of a constructivist approach, yet allowing differentiated syllabi and teaching and learning activities risks dilution of standards and threatens quality assurance (Doherty, 2004). The only solution would appear to be much increased collaboration between all teaching staff across campuses in devising curriculum, with extensive negotiation of key discipline principles, and flexibility to incorporate distinct local needs. MSA staff in particular were adamant that staff exchanges held the best promise, although both MM and MSA staff had little confidence Australian-based staff would find exchange attractive. One noteworthy feature in relation to content is that few administrators, staff or students believed it was in any way problematic: 'IT is IT all over the world'; 'programming is the same everywhere'. Doherty's (2004) MBA lecturer argued that same applied to MBA subjects. A small number of staff, mostly at MSA, recognised that communication skills were becoming more critical as the industry evolved, and became absorbed into core business skills. This is also the argument of a new report on IT curriculum (Lewis, McKay and Lang, 2006), reported in *Campus Review* 8/2/2006.

Implications for staff development

In the Monash case at least, staff development for offshore campuses is a major challenge, with few resources, human or financial, dedicated to ensuring either a common Monash teaching and learning approach, or programs of professional development in teaching, although the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education is now offered in MM and MSA. The GCHE model is 'fly-in/fly-out' intensive modules delivered by academic staff who themselves had no formal induction to the different cultural contexts in MM or MSA.

Clearly the global university requires a thorough knowledge of its different socio-cultural contexts and systematic exploration of the many issues involved. It also involves a commitment to provide sufficient budget for the professional collaboration necessary to successful discipline teaching.

Implications for educational theory

I have already alluded to the inherent tension between constructivist pedagogy and a centrally-developed curriculum, absent collaborative development among all staff involved. This issue is particularly pertinent given the current attack on constructivism by conservatives such as Kevin Donnelly, who describes the student-centred approach as 'curriculum lite', and argues for a return to "more formal explicit methods of teaching" (*The Weekend Australian*, January 21-22 2006, p. 27). Whatever the pedagogical approach adopted, staff in transnational teaching contexts must actively discuss and share the pedagogical approach, whether it is content-driven, and favouring fact-memorisation, or promoting problem solving and critical thinking. The three Monahs campuses offer an excellent research field for comparative learning style theory in a more extended research project.

Summary

Globalisation has provided much meat for university researchers in various disciplines, yet its manifestations within the university sector at the operational teaching level have been suffered rather than studied. Clearly there is a need in any university transnational strategy for a thoroughly planned implementation process. This should focus first on engaging operational staff; it should take full account of teaching and learning contexts, and provide pedagogical and cultural education for all the staff involved in the venture, at both onshore and offshore sites. Ideally, it should also offer students much more than a internationally recognised qualification: it should also draw on their different cultural backgrounds, so that they create an international curriculum.

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