A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO QA FOR TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Stephen Connelly, Swinburne University of Technology

Jim Garton, Swinburne University of Technology

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the QA best practice model for higher education transnational education (TNE) programs recently developed at Swinburne, and the early stages of its implementation. The framework can be conveniently drawn as a four-box model which integrates planning and QA, and emphasises strategic guidelines and the client perspective, as well as academic and administration guidelines (see Table 1, below). The framework operates within the “fitness for purpose” QA approach adopted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA 2005), and is informed by the new “Provision of education to international students: code of practice and guidelines for Australian universities” recently published by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC), to which all Australian universities are signatories (AVCC 2005).

We were given the opportunity to explore QA models and develop a “conceptual framework” for TNE programs by the award of research funding from the AVCC offshore quality project to Swinburne University in September 2004. The project was completed and a report submitted to the AVCC in June 2005 (Connelly & Garton 2005).

The function of the framework is to:

- integrate TNEP planning and QA from the concept proposal stage
- provide an overview or map to university TNEP procedures and logistics as a tool for collating information essential to strategic management
- monitor university compliance on regulatory issues (AUQA, AVCC, host country regulations)

The planning and QA framework is being applied to the logistics for transnational education programs (TNEP), in the form of guidelines for TNEP project initiation, project management, and project review. The framework and guidelines are part of Swinburne’s Internationalisation Strategic Plan, and are being developed by the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International), in consultation with university divisions who are managing TNE programs, and with various academic and administrative committees involved in policy affecting TNE programs.

The overall context for the discussion is the effort of universities to become multinational organisations with internationalised staff and students. TNE programs are an increasingly significant factor in this process, given significant growth over the last decade (DFAT 2005, p. 56). In turn, the quality of TNE programs is a key strategic issue, as shown by the recent discussion paper from the Department of Education, Science and Training, with a “Transnational Quality Strategy” under development this year (AEI 2005).

The more immediate goal is continuing improvement in planning and logistics for TNE programs, an effort that will always be a work in progress as transnational education rapidly evolves and constantly presents new challenges. To meet these challenges, universities need to overcome deficiencies in strategic planning and quality assurance (Garrett 2004).
THE SWINBURNE AVCC OFFSHORE QA PROJECT

The need for a framework

Planning for TNEPs is complicated by the complex demands that have to be met, including the diverse sets of national regulations in effect around the world. Not only do Australian universities have to satisfy the logistical and regulatory demands at the Australian end, but also of course the shifting demands of the countries we are dealing with.

In terms of regulatory environments, the task of universities is made more difficult by the extensive lists of recommendations and prohibitions typical of regulatory systems. For example, both the UK regulations laid down by the QAA (QAA 2004), and the AVCC code and guidelines (AVCC 2005), although grouped in various ways, are not promulgated within a readily comprehensible conceptual framework.

There is therefore a need for a map through all this complexity, so that we can find our way through the long lists of guidelines, forms and the mountain of paperwork that is generated. At Swinburne, the development of a framework for TNEP planning and logistics took place against the background of the institution’s AUQA audit, which recommended:

“Recommendation 18: That the planned development of an overall framework for quality assurance of SUT courses delivered off-shore be undertaken and implemented.” (AUQA 2003a, p. 38)

Such a recommendation represented a significant opportunity for the newly formed Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (International) to establish centralised TNEP planning, approval and monitoring processes and procedures where none had previously existed.

A best practice model

The best practice model shown in the four-box diagram below is the outcome of a project conducted for the AVCC by the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) at Swinburne (see Connelly & Garton 2005).

![Diagram](Image)
The framework takes a whole-of-institution approach to planning and QA for TNE programs. It is based on the outcomes of an IDP project conducted by Davis, Olsen & Bohm (2000), and is built around the following four areas: strategic guidelines; client perspective guidelines; academic guidelines; and administration guidelines.

Quality assurance is integrated into the planning framework from the very beginning at the concept stage of planning (Weeks-Kaye, 2004), with the overall goal of minimal but effective central co-ordination. The framework is a “big picture” map, rather than a chronological process. As well as integrating planning and QA, the framework emphasizes Strategic Guidelines and Client Perspective guidelines.

As noted above, the purpose of the framework is to integrate TNEP planning and QA from the concept proposal stage; to provide an overview or map to university TNEP procedures and logistics as a tool for collating information essential to strategic management; and to monitor university compliance on regulatory issues (AUQA, AVCC, host country regulations).

The four boxes of the framework are not watertight compartments – obviously Client Perspective issues will appear in other boxes, and so on. However, the framework is intended to act as a strategic checklist for the often overwhelming number of issues to be accounted for in establishing and managing TNE programs.

Each box is explained briefly below. More details on each box are given in the Appendix.

**Strategic QA guidelines**

The process of developing strategy for international activities such as TNEPs needs to take into account broader institutional objectives, as well as national and international factors (regulatory frameworks, issues of supply and demand, capacity to pay, competition). QA is a major consideration in TNEP initiatives world-wide:

“Quality assurance is an important part of academic professionalism. It is also a key mechanism for building institutional reputation or brand in a competitive local and global arena and a necessary foundation for consumer protection. Across the world, it is part of the armoury used by governments to increase, widen or control participation in the face of rising demand for higher education and it is central to current debates about higher education as a public good or tradable commodity.” (Middlehurst & Campbell 2003, p. 4)

Within universities, TNEP strategy development needs to take into consideration such factors as: the role of an International Programs Committee; alignment of international activities with university goals and objectives; alignment of planning processes (university-wide, divisional, etc.); synchronisation of TNEP with onshore recruitment activities and other internationalisation activities; and collaboration with existing offshore operations.

Strategic guidelines ensure that planning and QA for TNE programs are integrated from the concept proposal stage onwards. The six items in the Strategic QA Guidelines box are intended to ensure that proposals are strategically aligned across the university, with clear decision making processes and QA responsibilities, a sound partner selection strategy, an education plan which addresses the relevant accreditation and assessment issues, and appropriate business development processes. This last item includes financial management, which is a controversial area of TNEP planning and implementation in terms of relevant models and needs particular attention (Back 2004).
Client perspective QA guidelines

At all times it is necessary to recognise the importance of the client, the student in the case of TNEP, in the delivery of services and products related to the TNEP experience. Service level benchmarks are set by the AVCC Code and the ESOS Act and the university’s performance must be judged against these. (The ESOS Act applies to onshore students only, but sets a benchmark for service delivery and consumer protection that can be applied to offshore students).

The separate category of guidelines for “Client Perspective” in this model enables us to view the entire framework from the viewpoint of students, providing a crosscheck on a range of QA issues from a consumer perspective throughout the student experience. The Client Perspective Guidelines cover a range of vital consumer needs and consumer protection issues.

Academic QA guidelines

Swinburne, as a dual sector institution, has statutory boards in higher education and in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) for the approval of academic programs wherever and however they are delivered. Concept proposals are developed at school, faculty and divisional level for consideration by university executive, following which accreditation documentation is submitted to Academic Board or Board of TAFE Studies. For TNEP, academic QA approval processes are currently being aligned with the process for approval to deliver a TNEP. While it is important to ensure all required approvals are obtained, streamlining of procedures is also necessary so that program proposals are not bogged down with undue paperwork.

The issue of comparable standards is fundamental to academic QA, and underpins much of the list in this box from the framework.

Administration QA guidelines

Similar to Academic QA issues, it is important in an era of increasing scrutiny of TNEP that administrative procedures support the delivery of a quality academic program such that TNEP students are administered in a manner comparable to their onshore counterparts. We need to be able to count TNEP students accurately, audit recruitment, application and enrolment procedures, upload data from TNEP partner systems to central university systems, monitor student progress effectively, manage academic progression matters in a timely manner, and assign responsibility for these tasks appropriately between partner and provider institution staff.

Managers and administrators may well agree with Castle & Kelly (2004, p. 55) when they state: “Administrative systems are as important as teaching delivery in ensuring the success of offshore programs.” Even the best of academic programs loses status if students are not properly enrolled, or experience some other administrative calamity, which could arise from the neglect of any of the issues listed in the administration QA box of the framework.

Applying the four-box model

An agreed planning and QA framework is vital to negotiating the differing stakeholder perspectives on TNE initiatives within a university. Amongst other things, the four-box model quickly illustrates the range of issues to be addressed, and the many facets of planning and QA to be dealt with. TNEP planning and logistics can then be tackled with
some knowledge of the different perspectives involved. These implementation issues are addressed further below.

THE ROLE OF AN INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Stakeholder perspectives

There are wide differences of opinion both inside and outside universities on the roles of central administrative units and the implementation of QA initiatives. Watty (2003, p. 216), for instance, notes the differing interpretations of quality by stakeholders such as government, quality agencies, universities and individual academics.

Some of these differences in stakeholder perspectives come into play when it comes to implementing TNE initiatives. For example, there is tension in universities between top-down and bottom-up TNE initiatives, which Delves & Wilson sum up as follows:

“All universities face a dilemma in the decision-making processes relating to offshore arrangements. The dilemma is ensuring a balance between adequate risk assessment and overall academic, strategic and resource evaluation for the initiative, and, at the same time, being able to seize upon new opportunities in a timely fashion. An effective decision-making process must allow for a range of approaches, which include, for example, the tendering approach by an overseas partner or agent. The process must also be flexible enough to accommodate new initiatives, which may arise from a university-wide decision relating to strategic positioning or an individual academic unit identifying a lucrative opportunity…” (Delves & Wilson, 2000, p. 110)

Bottom-up approaches are usually department or faculty driven at a relatively low cost, while top-down approaches typically involve larger scale undertakings with several university groups and a major financial commitment (McBurnie & Pollock 2000, p. 55). Bottom up approaches are more likely to be ad hoc or a “one-off”, rather than part of any university-wide planning. As David Woodhouse, Executive Director of AUQA has noted:

“A major problem is that off-shore work is still a departmental initiative to a much greater extent than any other significant university activity… Things happen of which the centre is ignorant.” (Woodhouse, 2004)

In the top-down approach, central administration necessarily has a greater role to play, typically facilitated by some form of international office, and there is a greater likelihood of a strategic approach. However, it is vitally necessary to have the support of the faculties involved in program delivery for central initiatives, or the program may start with a whimper rather than a bang, and never make much of an impact.

Brake and accelerator function

Olsen (2005, p. 11) argues that a central international office needs to apply both a brake function and an accelerator function in transnational education strategy. On the one hand the “brake function” is to protect the university from financial and reputational risk, by applying good practice models to all proposed transnational education initiatives.

The “accelerator function” comes into play by encouraging proposals for transnational initiatives, in the target countries, ensuring that the proposals meet good practice benchmarks (ibid.).
APPLYING THE MODEL TO PLANNING & QA

From planning to logistics

The framework also maps onto a sequential set of logistical procedures, labelled Project Initiation, Project Management, and Project Review, as shown below in the TNEP Logistics table.

The Strategic Guidelines discussed in the planning framework are mapped mainly onto the Project Initiation stage. The Academic and Administration Guidelines are concentrated in the second and third stages, Project Management and Project Review. The Client Perspective quadrant of the Planning and QA framework is used as a check against all stages of the TNEP logistics system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TNEP LOGISTICS TABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROJECT INITIATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Strategic assessment of proposed partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o QA strategy integrated into planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Provider policy and QA meet Australian regulatory requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Partner institution profile &amp; background reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Site visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Education plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Accreditation and approvals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Program delivery model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Curriculum planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Business plan in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Market and competitor analysis undertaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Due diligence undertaken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Risk management procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Contract negotiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Third Party agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Contract finalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Exit strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROJECT MANAGEMENT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider institution:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Management arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Curriculum in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Project Management Manual distributed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Marketing guidelines issued to partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Staffing arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Staff development briefing sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Occupational Health &amp; Safety issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Student administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Student information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Partner manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner institution:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Management arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Staffing arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Student administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Staff development briefing sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Course accreditation confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Student support in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROJECT REVIEW</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Annual reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o QA Manual implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Compliance system in place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Marketing plans and reports submitted by partner institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Student surveys conducted every semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Staff feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Comparative exam results data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Exit strategy reviewed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: TNEP logistics

The four-box model can be incorporated into three manuals: a Project Initiation Manual, Project Management Manual (one each for the provider and partner institution), and a review manual for QA audit purposes. The manuals incorporate procedures already in place at Swinburne, for example in programs at the Sarawak campus, for the Master of International Accounting (MIntA) in Vietnam, and for the B. Sc. (IT) in Hong Kong.

Project initiation: concept to contract

Project Initiation procedures are focused on approvals processes from the very beginning of the project’s life, to the writing of a university contract to be signed by Swinburne and the partner.

The process of approval involves internal division/faculty approvals, consultation with the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) and the legal office, and review by the International Programs Committee prior to signing.
From the user’s perspective, the process involves two forms and a contract checklist. The forms are the Project Outline form and the Full Proposal form. The information required covers a wide range of issues.

Initially the Project Outline requests basic information about the type of program proposed and the partner details. The proposer must state how the proposal meets divisional/faculty objectives (and therefore university objectives). Preliminary information about the partner might include site visits and background reports from local experts, for example, Australian Education International in the partner country.

The Initial Education Plan in the Project Outline includes a description of the program delivery model, approvals required both in Australia and the partner country, curriculum delivery, and so on.

If this stage is approved, the applicants can arrange a Memorandum of Understanding if one is required. In order to proceed to the contract stage, then Form 2 or the Full Proposal stage requires the applicants to submit a budget, a full Education Plan with detailed information about curriculum, staffing, staff development, assessment and administration arrangements, together with market and risk analysis, and due diligence on the partner.

If the application is approved, negotiations can then proceed towards a contract with the partner. A contract checklist is provided with key matters for consideration, depending on the program delivery model employed.

**Project management: committees to classrooms**

This stage is about managing project implementation, and mainly involves the Academic and Administration Guidelines boxes from the TNEP Planning & QA framework. The relevant committees and project managers are appointed, with direct responsibility for curriculum delivery, staff development, administration systems and so on.

The issue of comparable standards is obviously a major issue for quality assurance in TNE programs (AEI 2005, p. 36). So far as compliance is concerned, while it is important to engage partners as equals in review procedures, in the Australian QA context the Australian university is responsible for its program standards, and therefore must ensure that they are maintained by the partner. This is equally true of an Australian institution that franchises programs belonging to a foreign institution for delivery in Australia.

The responsibilities of this stage would include, for example, a staff development program for briefing staff going offshore, on topics such as cross cultural understanding; environmental conditions; briefing on institutional profile, the university’s Internationalisation Plan; information about the host university; the academic program; student surveys; travel and accommodation information, health and safety etc. Such a professional development program has been designed for a Swinburne central initiative developing joint programs in China, building on other offshore programs already in place for faculty-based initiatives.

The project management procedures also manage student administration issues, with the goal of ensuring that the partner institution administration procedures are aligned with Swinburne procedures. The same principles apply to marketing guidelines and financial administration.
Project review: comparisons to compliance

So far as the internal workings of TNE programs are concerned, the two main issues in the TNE Project review procedures are comparable standards, and partner compliance. The achievement of comparable standards across the board, asking whether academic outcomes, student satisfaction, staffing issues, facilities and resources are comparable to the provider institution, is a benchmark of overall achievement.

The “Client Perspective” box of our planning and QA framework is an important check in this area, particularly for matters affecting consumer protection such as grievance procedures and fee refunds. Student surveys and student interviews are standard procedures for keeping the client’s interests in focus.

An important tool for accountability of the internal workings of TNE program provision is the Annual Review as outlined in the AUQA Good Practice Database for Curtin University of Technology:

“Annual Reviews are submitted to the Director (IQ&E) by 31 March each year. Matters reported include:
- collaborators’ quality assurance (QA) procedures
- equivalence of entry levels and performance of students for offshore programs with those for the programs delivered onshore
- enrolment procedures (to check that they align with contractual obligations)
- approval of local teaching staff by Curtin - qualifications and experience
- induction for local staff and cultural awareness training for Curtin staff who teach offshore
- course content (equivalence) and material (standard and availability)
- classrooms, computer and library resources, other facilities
- services (administrative, academic support, bookshop, food outlets)
- examination procedures (security of papers, moderation, marking, Boards of examiners, timeliness of results available to students, appeal procedures)
- feedback mechanisms available for students and staff, and evidence of action on feedback
- compliance with the terms of the contract (by Curtin and the collaborator).”
(AUQA 2003b, p. 1)

From an external perspective, weighing up a program as a whole, the main strategic issues include the viability of the program, when we ask what value it adds to the provider institution’s profile and brand, and financial management.

The value added in overall terms by a TNE program is a measure of its success as a strategic initiative and involves weighing up the value of the partnership against the aims of the strategic initiative of which the program is a part, and against the mission of the provider institution.

Financial management asks similarly big questions about whether the program is worth the effort, including ensuring that appropriate financial models are being used to provide an accurate measure of financial performance. (Back 2004, p. 8).

Thus the project review stage of the TNEP program cycle takes us back to strategic considerations including reconsideration of the partnership selection strategy and the business plan.
CONCLUSION

No framework can give simple or final answers to the questions raised in the complex and constantly shifting field of transnational education. Any framework is necessarily a work in progress.

However, the aim of the planning and QA framework discussed in this paper is to provide a map that might help to guide us through the maze of strategic, logistical and regulatory issues affecting TNE programs.

APPENDIX: QA GUIDELINES DETAILS

1. Strategic Guidelines

1.1 Policy framework
- Internationalisation Plan
- Assessment of strategic significance of the TNE program
- Aligns with provider institution policy framework in a whole-of-institution approach
- Advances a core provider institution function
- Sufficient quality to maintain or enhance the provider institution reputation
- Financial goals and financial security

1.2 QA strategy
- Clearly identified responsibility for QA, including responsibility for compliance with regulatory authorities
- Quality improvement cycle
- Benchmarking and peer review

1.3 Decision making process
- Transparent decision making
- Clearly identified decision making processes and management structures

1.4 Partner Selection strategy
- Transparent and documented process
- Reputation and culture
- Relationship management
- Written agreement
- Third party agreements

1.5 Education plan
- Framed by the provider institution’s Teaching and Learning Plan
- Subject to approval and review by the provider institution and partner institution
- Professional infrastructure plans in place

1.6 Business development process QA
- Business plans in place
- Market and competitor analysis undertaken
- Due diligence undertaken
- Risk management procedures in place
- Physical facilities of satisfactory standard

2. Client Perspective Guidelines

2.1 Client needs
- Information for students
- Academic entry standards
- Appropriate levels of counselling and academic support

2.2 Student experience planning
Streamlined enquiries, applications, admissions and enrolment procedures
Course sequences seamlessly articulated
Good quality teaching, resources and facilities
Access to alumni resources (which may be organised and supported in-country)

2.3 Consumer protection
Termination arrangements
Fees administered consistent with AVCC refund policy
Agents trained and monitored
Grievance procedures
Marketing materials give accurate information about courses and facilities

2.4 Client feedback
Regular student surveys, with results published to students
Student consultation conducted as routine part of course administration

2.5 Equity issues addressed

3. Academic Guidelines

3.1 Comparable standards
Comparable standards to same or similar program in Australia, including staff qualifications
Meets any national or international benchmarks

3.2 Sound pedagogy
Transnational programs should be pedagogically sound with respect to methods of teaching, nature and needs of learners and materials for teaching and learning

3.3 Approval and accreditation process
Course and subject approval mechanisms ensure that both offshore and internal accreditation is obtained
Transnational programs do not alter the intention of program or course approval without explicit change to approval

3.4 Equitable and ethical treatment of students
Students who receive provider institution awards on completion are enrolled as students of the university, are subject to the AVCC Code, and are subject to the same entry standards, academic regulations and discipline as students in Australia

3.5 Assessment
Assessment methods should be under the control or quality assurance of the provider institution

3.6 Academic staff support
Support is available for staff teaching on TNE programs, including relevant staff development, guidelines, and facilities offshore

3.7 Awards – quality and control
Students in transnational programs should be assured by the university that programs meet its quality criteria and that standards are equivalent
The process of issuing awards, including certificates and transcripts, remains under the control of the provider institution

4. Administration Guidelines

4.1 Project Management structures in place
TNEP Project management system in place, with nominated provider institution personnel responsible for management and QA issues
Project management manual in operation
4.2 Partner institution student administration procedures aligned with provider institution procedures
- Systems for enquiries, applications, offer/acceptance, and enrolments aligned
- Selection criteria published for admission to TNE programs
- Student administration guidelines issued to partner and staff development briefings carried out

4.3 Marketing guidelines
- Marketing guidelines should be issued to partners and staff development briefings carried out

4.4 Financial administration
- Procedures adopted and monitored for financial administration

4.5 Quality assurance system in place
- Quality assurance system in place, with dedicated resources

4.6 Annual review
- Annual reviews of transnational Programs, including review of administration systems, facilities, academic program management, and staff and student surveys

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Alan Olsen, Director, Strategy Policy and Research in Education Ltd, Hong Kong, for comments on drafts of this paper.

REFERENCES


