BRINGING THE BEST OF BUSINESS AND ACADEMIC PRACTICE TO BEAR ON OFFSHORE EVALUATION IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: The effectiveness of offshore programs is important to the higher and vocational educational sectors, yet there is little research that draws together best evaluation practice from both business and academia. There is little too that acknowledges the complexity provided by cross-cultural understandings of evaluation. Business evaluations often involve short-term outcomes and focus on immediate utility whilst academic evaluations often focus on the ability to generalise findings to other settings. Cross-cultural variations in evaluative practice are another poorly examined field. Using a comparative approach, this presentation will outline the key considerations for designing evaluative systems, ones that acknowledge not only the dynamic context in which evaluation occurs but also changing governmental constraints. A model will be presented that systematises improvement in offshore delivery by means of evaluation.

Introduction

Offshore delivery of teaching and learning programs has become a key focus for Australian higher education. It is generally accepted that an “offshore” course is one that is intended to be taught by any means (face-to-face, distance, online, or a hybrid of these referred to as ‘multimode’) outside Australian geographical boundaries. The Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC) recently released its revised “Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities for the Provision of Education to International Students” April 2005. The AVCC states

“...the Australian university should develop, implement and rigorously review quality assurance processes for offshore programs." (p.5).

The Australian Government has provided $10.6 million for the strengthening of offshore quality from the $113 million International Education budget initiative (Ministerial Media Release, 1081/05). Part of this funding will be directed towards enhanced Quality Auditing of Offshore Higher Education to be undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) (DEST, 2005).

Yet the complexity of offshore teaching and learning is not recognised in current evaluative processes. The literature suggests that offshore delivery is narrowly conceived from both a cultural and evaluative perspective. Culture is viewed only in the narrowest sense concerning national patterns of structure and style and does not take account of more subtle variations in structures and style to be found even within the same institution. Cultural considerations do not typically acknowledge the changing context of higher education in Australia and the potential for tensions between government and academe. Evaluation is focused only on teaching and learning and does not recognize the continual, iterative, comprehensive and project based nature of offshore delivery, involving numerous stakeholders and ongoing points of student contact with the home and partner institutions. Drawing on past research and present practice, this paper will draw on both business and academic
practice to provide a systems-based, comprehensive evaluation model for offshore teaching and learning. We would expect that adoption of such a model should lead to greater confidence amongst disparate stakeholders in offshore delivery and should acknowledge the dynamic context in which offshore delivery is taking place. We will briefly review current literature and, through a problem-based approach, suggest a model of evaluation that recognises the complexity of the relationships involved and the challenges of the context in delivering a successful offshore program.

Offshore Teaching And Learning Quality - Current Issues And Problems

Before we examine the various current evaluative methods, it is necessary to review the problems experienced by all stakeholders of offshore delivery. The following section explores the literature on the various forces that have combined to press for improvements in evaluation of quality. These will be considered in the following paragraphs, firstly at the student and staff levels and secondly, at the faculty and university levels. It will be evident from this review that evaluation is targeted at teaching and learning alone and is often piecemeal and reactive, lacking a systematic and comprehensive basis on which to involve all stakeholders.

Student and Staff Levels

In recent years, offshore delivery has been characterised by rising offshore prospective student expectations, a situation that is due to a number of factors. The cost of study is increasing due to the decline of public funding of Australian universities. According to statistics provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training, “more than 20% of Australia’s international education is delivered offshore, and this is increasing” (DEST, 2005). This represents more than 100,000 offshore international enrolments each year with a financial return in 2004 to Australian institutions of more than $374 million. Significantly, “it is estimated that by 2012 income from offshore courses will exceed $1.5 billion a year” (Ministerial Media Release, 1081/05). Growing competition for students from education providers nationally and internationally (Wahr and Ladloff 2002) has led to the increasing use of quality as a marketing tool. It is not surprising that student expectations have risen in response.

However, the most important debate in the quality assurance literature concerns the comparability of the teaching and learning process across different cultural contexts. Some researchers in quality assurance assume that the process is similar across different settings whilst others suspect that there are significant variations in the teaching and learning process across various contexts. There is now a growing body of literature that key conceptions such as ‘effective teaching’, ‘learning’, and ‘self’, vary across cultures. Pratt, Kelly and Wong (1999) in their analysis of the teaching and learning conceptions of 397 Hong Kong university students and 82 academic staff, found that teaching, learning and knowing are deeply rooted in specific cultural antecedents and social structures. By extension, evaluation within learning needs to be recognised as a cultural and value-laden interpretation of all that we observe. Pratt et al found that there are significant differences between East and West in the value of foundational knowledge, appropriate roles and relationships for teachers and students, the process of teaching and attributions of responsibility for effective teaching. Wang (2005) in her recent phenomenographic study observed similar differences for postgraduate students in mainland China. MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003) argue for a diversity of assessment modalities in internationalisation of our curriculum that value and incorporate difference.
The importance of matching teaching and learning styles, and the role cultural and intellectual factors play, is well documented (e.g. Fisher, Lee & Birt 2002; Liesch & Fairfield, 1992). In the onshore education arena, Fisher, Lee, & Birt (2002) and Birt, Sherry, Ling, Fisher & Lee (2004) replicated and extended the work of Niehoff, Turnley, Yen & Sheu, (2001), Rhodes, (1998), and Yamauchi (1998), in two large sample empirical studies of 385 and 997 domestic and international students studying in Australia & New Zealand. Both studies, (i.e. Fisher et al 2002; Birt et al 2004), identified the importance of avoiding stereotypical assessment of the likely behaviour and attitudes of international students and domestic students. They also identified intra-cultural differences, and national differences within ‘Asian’ cultures. Crabtree and Sapp, (2004) also show that lecturers often do not take account of the culture they are involved in often by not adjusting to the host culture’s experience of time and formalities, and classroom rhythms. This research provides an excellent discussion at the micro level of the various cultural asynchronies that teaching staff experience offshore.

Researchers assert that the failure to adapt to different cultures may result in diminished student learning, course absence, and withdrawal (Cronninger, 1991; Good, 1993) and compromised student-teacher relationships (Kolb, Osland & Rubin, 1995; Feldman & Thiess, 1982). Much of the research on student expectations in Australia has concentrated on the social and communication issues, (Ti, 1997, Volet & Ang, 1998; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000), lifestyle issues (Ti, 1997) and the application of ‘culture shock’ theory to the university environment (Marx, 2001; Burke, 2001). The recommendations that arise from this research concentrates on ‘classroom culture’ improvement (e.g. Treloar, McCall, Rolfe, Pearson, Garvey & Heathcote, 2000) rather than student, teacher or program performance improvement. Further, the description of learning styles and culture presented in this research is generalized and non-empirical (e.g. Phillips, 1990; Ballard and Clanchy, 1991) or, at best, presented in descriptive statistics based on small samples (e.g. Lovejoy, 2001). Fisher et al (2002) emphasised consideration of these issues in program design, implementation and evaluation as important areas for further research.

Faculty and University Levels

External drivers of improvement include government-mandated audits such as the Australian Universities Quality Audit (AUQA). Amongst AUQA’s reviews of offshore operations by Australian universities, they found difficulties with offshore programs: some institutions: were insufficiently appraised of overseas operations; misled international applicants regarding program content; conducted insufficient due diligence on their international partners; and made loose contractual arrangements. In addition, poor communication often led to problems for offshore students and the quality of offshore staff was occasionally questioned. In relation to quality assurance, the audit panels found that some institutions had insufficient quality assurance mechanisms in place for their offshore operations and none had conducted a comparative analysis of their offshore and onshore academic performance. Confusion was evident in areas of responsibility between a core institution and its partner institution (Coleman, 2003). Some of these various difficulties have been backed by other empirical research, which shows that lecturers often are not adequately prepared for the specific rigors of teaching overseas (Gribble and Ziguas, 2003). Gribble and Ziguas suggested that universities prepare staff by providing information about general issues routinely faced in transnational programs; providing country specific information to assist lecturers to make their teaching relevant to offshore settings; and, by developing systems that support and enhance the informal
support and sharing of information between teaching staff. Given the recent SARS outbreak and other natural disaster events, Feast and Bretag (2005) found that there were no contingency plans for emergencies.

The Australian Government is also currently focusing on improving comparability/equivalence between onshore and offshore delivery in terms of:

- the admission of students;
- assessment and moderation processes;
- measuring student experience (including student satisfaction with learning and teaching and other issues such as access to support, resources and facilities) and/or graduate outcomes;
- aspects of teaching and learning, such as quality assuring the curriculum and/or the skills and qualifications of teaching staff;
- provision of student support services;
- applying agreed policies and rules, such as those related to student grievances.
- developing frameworks for selecting and approving suitable offshore partners of appropriate quality and standing and ensuring contracts between partners contain adequate quality assurance measures;
- developing frameworks for selecting and approving suitable agents and ensuring contracts between institutions and agents have adequate quality assurance;
- developing principles for advertising and promotional materials that are ethical and uphold the reputation of Australian education and training.

It is important to note that one of the outcomes of DEST scrutiny has been a Discussion Paper circulated for commentary within the university community - “A National Quality Strategy for Australian Transnational Education and Training”. In this paper, Brendan Nelson, the Minister for Education, cites increasing transnational activities, the potential for difficulties to arise in an important Australian market, and, therefore, the need to seek feedback on three proposed approaches to strengthening the national quality framework. Two of these models would mean significant external monitoring of quality assurance functions for offshore provision and the longer-term imposition of control structures by government.

A brief review of web based materials from a sample of Australian universities suggests that there is a genuine desire on the part of the sector to strengthen and streamline existing quality assurance processes. There is equal pressure on university resources to rationalise the demands of the range of auditing requirements on individual programs, thus reducing staff workloads. Strategic Plans tend to emphasise the conduct of evidence based self evaluations, external reviews and benchmarking assessments in order to provide effective quality assurance in teaching and learning. They also endorse the implementation of quality improvement processes that recognise and reward excellence and help build the capacity of the university to respond to external change. Some universities are explicitly adopting and implementing internationalisation across the University community. The intention of this process is to emphasise inclusivity in the classroom by means of staff training in intercultural communication skills and to encourage an increasing awareness of an internationalised curriculum. Interestingly, for the present paper, the

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internationalisation agenda in various universities is seeking to devise clearer evaluation criteria for each program at subject, program, school and divisional levels, particularly where criteria may differ culturally from the offshore partner institution.

In terms of comparability of standards, teaching and assessment are not the only sites of cultural differences for onshore and offshore students. The student experiences offshore education in its totality. A beautifully designed and delivered approach which is inefficiently administered or inappropriately resourced will neither assure quality nor ensure standards (Gallagher 2002, 2003 cited in Castle and Kelly 2004). Ironically, differences in resources and educational structures may even mean that standardisation could even reduce quality (Biggs, 1999). Such variations in teaching and learning processes between East and West make it difficult to simply transpose ‘off the shelf’ evaluative systems designed to improve teaching and learning in offshore locations. The challenge in evaluative systems is to recognise cultural and geographical diversity but also seek consistency in quality and standards in degrees that are offered in multiple locations (Castle and Kelly, 2004). There is some evidence that ‘bottom up’ programs can be successful here, that is, those which assume that ownership and responsibility for continual improvement of programs involving international students lies with academic faculty (Wahr and Radloff, 2002).

The Nexus between the Evaluative Process and Relationships

Current evaluative processes for offshore delivery are narrowly conceived, tending to focus solely on teaching and learning, despite the complex set of legal, financial and administrative relationships that underpin excellence in teaching and learning. The prospective student does not typically experience teaching and learning alone but the administrative staff of both universities, and the outcome of legal, financial and resource based deliberations. Yet we continue to focus almost exclusively on teaching and learning in the research evaluative literature. If there is a sense amongst the stakeholders that ‘things’ are not working, or ‘things’ could be working better, efforts to improve are generally reactive, piecemeal and usually focus on single incidents of what, is in reality, a complex set of relationships among multiple stakeholders. Instead, evaluation should be ongoing, continually involve all stakeholders in a system wide approach, involve capturing the learning embedded in past experience and form an integral part of strategic planning.

Central to an ongoing systems based approach is an understanding that variations in the culture of stakeholders in offshore education are not limited to the usual understanding of cross cultural variation but is broadened to include variations in culture experienced even in a single institution. Whilst there are obvious differences between East and West, there are more subtle differences between academic and business cultures even within the same institution. An appreciation of the differences between corporate, public sector and collegial cultures recognizes that project management of offshore delivery may change according to the cultures and structures of the respective institutions. For those working in more business-oriented cultures, a large part of the culture determines who reports to whom, subject to what authority, and with what degree of independence. Strict codes of conduct require persistent communication and frequent renegotiations with those in responsibility. For those working in the more collegial cultures, there may still be aspects of the business culture, however, but also collegial networks, not for profit groups and loose knit entities that wax and wane over time (Kayrooz and Trevitt 2005). Ensuring good communication, responsibility and accountability between these pockets of culture, even within the same institution, can be challenging for all involved stakeholders.
Also central to an ongoing systems based approach is that the relationships between all of the stakeholders are not characterised by a linear or mechanical metaphor with clear-cut links between specific causes and specific effects. The environment is also not static but changing according to market, governmental, professional and student imperatives. Stakeholders communicate and operate in an environment that is both complex and organic and where there is an increasing level of uncertainty. This is an important distinction, and one that needs to be fostered, because in times of uncertainty organisations and their stakeholders need to be able to operate flexibly and responsively (Snowden p.23). In their work on complexity Axelrod and Cohen (1999 p.xi) ask the question: “In a world where many players are all adapting to each other and where the emerging future is extremely hard to predict, what actions should you take?” They refer to such worlds as ‘complex adaptive systems’. These systems are made up of many participants, perhaps even many kinds of participants, who interact in ways that continually shape their collective future.

Evaluation itself is typically conceived as a one-off activity usually positioned at the end of the teaching and learning. In actuality it is an ongoing process, designed at the outset in tandem with the formation of the contract and the pre-delivery stage, that does not complete with the closure to the teaching and learning of one cohort but rather aggregates over multiple cycles of cohorts to inform improved practice. These are crucial considerations when designing evaluation (Kayrooz and Trevitt, 2005). It is important that evaluation of offshore delivery is conceived as an ongoing process, involving both summative and formative evaluation. Summative evaluation is typically conducted to assess the outcomes of the program whilst formative evaluation is conducted while the program is under operation. Whilst the use of both formative and summative evaluation is needed continuously, formative evaluation will be emphasized more likely towards the initial stages of the cycle and summative evaluation will occur more likely towards the end. Evaluation will also occur at multiple levels and in multiple sites, and, for best effect, formative evaluation needs to be conducted by the individuals and teams that are actively involved in the process of offshore delivery. Summative evaluation can be independently conducted, keeping in mind that there are degrees of independence, whereby those inside the organisation but external to the delivery can conduct the evaluation.

An important step, therefore, in designing a framework for the evaluation of transnational teaching requires an acceptance that all of the stakeholders involved are participants in a complex adaptive system and as they act or interact they shape the collective future of everyone involved. Stakeholders include academics, students, home universities, partner universities, agents, and governments. It is clearly seen that an action on the part of one stakeholder, such as a change in government policy, or an interaction between two stakeholders, for example agents and partner universities, can impact on the whole system. Axelrod and Cohen (1999) also show that while it is not possible to control a complex environment, it is possible, and even essential, to manage it. For example, government policy is usually non-controllable by the other stakeholders and can only be managed. Evaluation then should be viewed as part of the process of managing the complex adaptive environment and not merely an end in itself. One of the biggest barriers to such a process occurs when the various stakeholders operate and think in ‘silos’. The problem with ‘silo thinking’ is that one ‘silo’ – or group of people – determines what it thinks its customers want; another group designs the product, other separate groups engineer or manufacture the product and yet another handles the marketing (Barabba p. 18). It is not difficult to apply the analogy to the stakeholders involved in transnational teaching and learning. Unfortunately, if stakeholders do not talk with each other in a systematic way, they only conceive the process from their own point of view and propose solutions to problems from this perspective as well.
Where rich communication is limited, relationships are not formed and actions based on self-interest dominate. By contrast, where stakeholders actively seek to learn from each other and to attempt to understand issues from an holistic or whole of system perspective, trust becomes an integral component of the relationships so formed and confidence in the system’s ability to self-generate predominates. In a chapter entitled, ‘Does your Organization have a Learning Disability?’, Senge suggests that the most significant threats are not sudden and dramatic but are gradual and consequently often are not noticed until it is almost too late. To see such slow gradual processes requires stakeholders to themselves slow down and pay attention to the subtle as well as the dramatic (Senge, 1990 p. 23).

A Suggested Model for Evaluating Offshore Delivery

The following model, as depicted in Figure 1 below, is intended to suggest a systematic comprehensive approach to addressing all stakeholders and aspects of the experience of teaching and learning as well as all aspects of the evaluative process. It is predicated on approaching evaluation from the course, rather than institutional level but could equally serve as a management tool for evaluating multiple courses at the institutional level in the same way as multiple projects are managed in a corporation or business. The framework incorporates suggestions made by other researchers (e.g. Castle & Kelly 2004; Coleman 2003) and in this sense draws on the best from business and academic practice.

The offshore evaluative cycle depicted in Figure 1 is intended to be an iterative process where learnings accumulate over time to ensure improvements occur continuously and are institutionalized into policy. The cycle is positioned around four key stages of offshore delivery – planning, pre-delivery, delivery, post delivery. Each stage has different stakeholders, represented by the balloons in Figure 1, who should be consulted or targeted as required in the evaluation. Each stage has formative and summative dimensions of evaluation. Detailing the precise methodology of each dimension is beyond the scope of this paper as it will vary according to the contextual features of the functional teams and home and partner institutions concerned.

The planning stage typically involves contact with the partner institution and preparation of the contract after due diligence procedures. It is important to assess the partner institution against benchmarks established by governmental and academic bodies and in consultation with key informants such as agents. Before ratifying the contract, checks will need to be made on the financial, resource, legal and business viability ad on the credibility of the partner institution and their ability to be accredited with the government and professional associations.

The pre-delivery stage involves marketing and preparation for teaching. During this stage, there needs to be an evaluative focus on student needs, pre-departure briefings for the teaching staff and briefings for co teachers on course content, scheduling, assessment and moderation. The establishment of a course reference group that no only involves all interested parties in the particular offshore delivery but others across both institutions, onshore and offshore, with existing expertise can be a useful tool for formatively evaluating the design and preparation of material. Cross institution reference groups can outline key cultural and classroom differences in organization, content and assessment. Once this stage is complete, materials should
Table 1: Offshore teaching evaluative cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formative</th>
<th>Summative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AUQA, AVCC, Institutional policy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Team</td>
<td>Government Offshore and Onshore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Institution</td>
<td>Partner Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home Institution</td>
<td>Home institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Teaching Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prospective students</td>
<td>Teaching Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Staff</td>
<td>Business Administration Team</td>
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<td>Post delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offshore Evaluative Cycle</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Co-teaching staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Staff</td>
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<td>Delivery</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Students</td>
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<td>Co-teaching staff</td>
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Formative and Summative:

**Formative**
- Consultation with key informants
- Bench marking assessment
- Financial and legal viability
- Credibility of partner university
- Resource feasibility
- Risk Management
- Governmental and Professional association accreditation

**Summative**
- Admission arrangements
- Credit arrangements
- Access to IT, library student services, administrative and academic support
- Adequacy of translation
- Resource issues for teaching
- Offshore partner academic qualifications
- Comparative analysis of offshore and onshore operations
- Student experience of overall course, both short and long-term outcomes
- Adult learning teaching methods
- Cultural sensitivity of teaching materials
- Student awareness of appeal/grievance processes
- Testamur according with guidelines
- Independent course assessment of materials, teaching and subjects
- Effectiveness of team functioning
- Reconciliation of proposal with actual costs
- Assessment & moderation processes
- Graduate outcomes
- Pre departure briefings
- Cross cultural course reference group
- Informal support systems
- Student expectations/needs analysis
- Line of resources to prepare teaching
- Co-teacher briefings on adult learning principles, assessment ad moderation
- Internationalisation of materials
- Cross-cultural comparatability
- Marketing in alignment with university
- Adequacy of translation

**Summative**
- Subject assessment standardisation
- Subject assessment ongoing focus group
be assessed for appropriate translation and cultural sensitivity. Marketing promulgated by the partner institution should be assessed for adherence to institutional ethics, standards and protocol.

In the delivery stage, involving teaching staff, co-teaching staff and students, subject delivery will need ongoing assessment whether by in class focus groups or questionnaire. At the end of each subject, standardised evaluation can be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the particular program. Any evaluation used here will need to be culture fair, attuned to the cultural sensitivities of the host country and broadened to include the administrative arrangements for that particular cohort.

The post delivery stage will involve the home and partner institutions, teaching staff, students and business team. At this stage, only summative, and preferably independent, assessment is required here, although there are many aspects that require evaluation. Besides evaluation of the overall teaching and learning, there needs to be a focus on admissions, resource and support arrangements, as well as the comparability of assessment and moderation, both between subjects and across institutions. The degree of cultural sensitivity should be considered and justified in tandem with the comparability of courses across institutions. Following the summative review, learnings can be captured in institutional policy and articulated into governmental and academic review.

The challenge then for designing evaluative systems for offshore teaching and learning is to understand evaluation from a systems-based comprehensive and continuous perspective that will put in place those processes that will help to manage the system’s complex environment and acknowledge the varying cultures in which offshore learning and teaching takes place.

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