Improving the Quality of Offshore Student Experience: Findings of a Decade in three Australian
Universities

Mahsood Shah a Kate Roth b and Chenicheri Sid Nair c

a Quality and Improvement, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia
b Macquarie International, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
c Centre for Advancement of Teaching and Learning, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

Abstract

The last 10 years has witnessed growth in the enrolment of international students in Australian Universities. The growth of international students have been experienced in both onshore and offshore component. The number of offshore programs and partnerships has also increased with some universities opening offshore campuses. The offshore component of all Australian universities have been under scrutiny by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) since 2002. A large number of universities have closed various offshore programs and partnerships after AUQA cycle one audits due to poor management and quality assurance of offshore operations. The large number of recommendations in public audit reports and negative media stories related to offshore operations have been heralded in almost all University audit reports. The vulnerability of quality assurance and the risk associated with the quality and standard of offshore education have been such that in 2006 the Australian government included internationalisation as a default theme in cycle two audits of almost all universities. Such a decision was made to protect the image and branding of Australian higher education and to improve the quality assurance of international education.

While the findings of various audit reports related to offshore education are known, there is limited research on student experience and satisfaction explicitly with offshore students. This paper outlines the findings of offshore student experience and satisfaction in three Australian Universities. The findings from the three studies with offshore students suggest that student experience, satisfaction and issues raised by offshore students are common in all three Universities. The paper also draws on the analysis of recurring themes related to offshore education based on AUQA cycle one and two audits of Australian universities.

Keyword: Offshore student experience and satisfaction, offshore quality assurance.

Introduction

The term ‘offshore or transnational’ describes the situation where international students are located in a different country to that of the institution providing their education services (Davis et al, 2000). The growth and development of the Australian higher education industry has involved the growth of both students in Australia and students at Australian institutions located offshore. Some have argued that this has been driven by a decline in public funding of universities (Marginson, 2009) and universities seeking external sources of income such as that derived from international student tuition fees. This paper outlines the findings of the student satisfaction survey undertaken with offshore students in three Australian universities. The paper also discusses the recurring recommendations and findings from Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) cycle 1 and 2 audits and the extent to which audits have improved quality assurance in offshore education. It is evident from the AUQA audit reports that progress has been made in terms of offshore delivery, however, analysis of student satisfaction indicates that there are further areas needing improvement.
According to (Shanahan & McParlane, 2005; Delves, Douglas & Dimmock, 2001), the reputation, image and standing of Australian higher education could be damaged in the international arena if areas needing improvement in offshore education are not addressed.

**Australian International Education Industry**

International education in Australia has grown significantly in the last decade. The Australian international education is the third largest export industry worth more than $AUD18.6 billion in 2010 (AEI, 2010). As of 2008, there were 294,000 (27.6 %) international onshore and offshore students, a 7.7 % growth from 2007 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

Onshore commencing international student numbers have grown at an average rate of 8 % in the last three years with enrolments of 84,473 in 2006, 97,768 in 2007 and 111,672 in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The trend is less evident in commencing offshore student enrolments compared to onshore student enrolments. The pattern of growth in commencing offshore international students has been slow; 26,990 in 2006; 28,941 in 2007 and 29,459 in 2008 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Figure 1 presents an overview of onshore and offshore student enrolments between 2003-2008.

**Figure 1: Onshore and Offshore Students in Australian Universities**

![Chart showing onshore and offshore student trends](chart)

The number of offshore student enrolments may indicate a slowing in the trend, however, offshore programs of Australian universities have consistently declined from 1,569 programs in 2003 to 1,002 programs in 2007 to 889 programs in 2008 (Universities Australia, 2009). According to Universities Australia, Australian universities offer 889 undergraduate and postgraduate courses with 14 offshore campuses and many partnership arrangements mostly in Asian countries (Universities Australia, 2009).

The year 2003 witnessed a decline in offshore student enrolments. It can be argued that one of the key contributors of this decline is the scrutiny of external audits undertaken by AUQA since 2002.
The Offshore Student Satisfaction
There is little argument that the cyclical monitoring of student satisfaction and experience enables institutions to identify areas of good practice and areas needing improvement in teaching, assessments, administrative support, campus facilities and other services. According to Kane, Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2008), student satisfaction feedback data can provide insights into socio-economic, political and cultural impacts on the student experience and it can indicate what students’ consistent concerns are and what priorities have changed over time. The complexity involved in teaching and managing offshore programs/partnerships require institutions to recognise and fulfil the moral purpose of higher education rather than focusing on maximising profit. One of the main challenges of universities is to provide a consistent and equivalent student experience across all faculties and campuses. This means that domestic, onshore international and offshore student satisfaction and experience in teaching and administrative areas should be similar and the measures used to monitor quality should show comparable results e.g. retention rates, progression rates and student satisfaction. Castle and Kelly (2004) argue that consistent monitoring and evaluation of outcomes is essential for offshore programs.

About the three Universities
The three universities included in this study are: a large elite multi-campus research intensive university with more than 45,000 students, a single campus university with 33,000 students and a large multi-campus university with 40,000 students. All universities have offshore students in various countries with a number of partners. One University is single campus, the other two universities have multiple campuses with one university having two offshore campuses. The offshore student body at these universities also differs in terms of student numbers from between 100 students to 2,000 students representing between 0.3 % and 4 % of the student populations in the respective universities.

Methodology
All three universities have used a student satisfaction survey for more than a decade, typically surveying students at least every two years. One university uses online survey only with email follow up. An online and paper based survey is distributed to all students in one of the other universities. Online survey is sent to students’ email account with follow up which links to a web based survey. The paper based survey with international reply paid envelop is used to follow up with non-respondents. The third University relies heavily on its partners to administer the surveys and facilitate student responses. All three universities have engaged academic staff involved in teaching offshore programs to communicate and promote the survey before its distribution.

The response rate in all three universities from the offshore students was between 25 -36 %. The survey questionnaire included items related to; course experience, outcomes of study, administration, learning support, student services, student facilities and local support provided by partner institution in overseas. Students are asked to rate these items on both importance and satisfaction. The survey used the 5 point scale with 1 reflecting the student ranking of low importance or low satisfaction and 5 reflecting the student ranking of high importance or high satisfaction.

The use of student satisfaction survey which measures the total student experience using importance and satisfaction rating allows institutions to identify four scenarios. First, universities are able to identify services that students rate as high importance with high satisfaction rating (i.e. services that could be rewarded), second, services that students rate as high importance with low satisfaction rating
(i.e. services needing immediate improvement), third, services that students rated as high satisfaction with low importance rating (i.e. services that could be rewarded) and finally services that students rate as low importance and low satisfaction (i.e. services that needs ongoing monitoring).

This paper draws upon the student evaluation data from three Australian universities and the AUQA audit findings to discuss the offshore student experience.

Findings and Discussion
The findings are based on the most recent surveys undertaken of offshore students at the three universities.

The findings reported are in three key areas, namely;

1. **Items offshore students have rated as high on importance (equal to mean score greater than 4.00) and also high on satisfaction (mean score greater than 3.50);**
2. **Items students have rated high on importance (mean score greater than 4.00) with low student satisfaction (mean score less than 3.20), and;**
3. **Top ten items attracting high percentage of not used services.**

Offshore students indicated high importance in areas related to the following; course outcomes; local support provided by the partner institution; various administrative support systems to support teaching and course design. Other items with a high mean score in importance are generic skills rated as most important by employers with early career graduates.

The findings suggest that offshore students are satisfied with the course outcomes which will enable student attainment of generic skills. Offshore students are also satisfied with admissions and enrolments and the quality of unit/subject outlines in all three universities.

Offshore student views on items rated as most important with lowest satisfaction rating include items related to areas such as; services provided by the local partner institution; computing and IT facilities; international student support; availability of electronic learning materials; timely and constructive feedback on student assessments by teachers; range of learning support particularly related to library and access to electronic materials; and effective resolution of administrative problems. Such areas require immediate attention in all three universities in order to improve student satisfaction, experience and enhancing student retention. A summary of the findings common to all universities in this study is reported in Table 1.

Table 1 : Commonality of the findings from the three universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>High Importance &lt; 4.00, High Satisfaction &lt; 3.50</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Areas where the universities are doing well)</th>
<th><strong>High Importance &lt; 4.00, Low Satisfaction &gt; 3.20</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Areas where improvement is needed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local study support</strong>&lt;br&gt;Safe study environment</td>
<td><strong>Local study support</strong>&lt;br&gt;Useful range of books and study resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes of my studies to date</strong>&lt;br&gt;An ability to think critically</td>
<td><strong>Computing facilities</strong>&lt;br&gt;Helpdesk Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills in communicating with people</strong></td>
<td><strong>Quality of Software</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The skills necessary to undertake on-going self-</strong></td>
<td></td>
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High Importance < 4.00, High Satisfaction < 3.50
(Areas where the universities are doing well)

- Directed learning
- Skills to work as an effective member of a team
- An enthusiasm for further learning
- Ethical values like honesty and integrity
- A respect for alternative viewpoints

High Importance < 4.00, Low Satisfaction > 3.20
(Areas where improvement is needed)

- Quality of Computing Equipment
- **International Student Services**
  - International Student Office
- **The course I am undertaking**
  - Enables me to electronically access essential information and content if I miss a class
- Provides timely and constructive feedback on learning
- **Learning support**
  - Photocopiers and Printing
  - Library Desk Service
  - Information Services
  - Electronic Access to Library Resources
  - Learning and study skills assistance
- **Administration**
  - Problems with administrative matters are effectively resolved

A comparison undertaken between onshore (domestic and international) and offshore students shows significant differences in satisfaction related to library services, student administration and timetabling, quality of teachers, provision of material listed in unit/subject outlines and student assessment issues such as timely and constructive feedback. The onshore result shows all items related to library services attracting high on importance and high satisfaction compared to the offshore experience.

Most of the services attracting high percentage as not used are items related to student facilities on the campus and services related to student support. Although offshore students do not use such facilities, they are important services which the university has to provide to cater the needs of the diverse student groups. The services which received high percentage as not used in rank order from high to low included: sports facilities, religious facilities, disability services, careers and employment advice, counselling, student associations, child care facilities, bars, shops and newsagencies and sports activities and programs.

**Discussion**

The commonality of the findings from the three universities tie in with the research literature related to offshore education. Primarily, the findings related to, quality assurance deficiencies in a number of areas including; the lack of planning, resourcing and leadership, lack of risk assessment, due diligence and financial viability of offshore programs (Chapman & Pyvis, 2006); resources and support for students, teaching quality, issues related to student assessment and
timely feedback (Heffernan & Poole, 2004); lack of policies and guidelines related to offshore programs/partnerships, inconsistent implementation of policies, registration and de-registration of programs/partnerships, lack of systematic student feedback processes, marketing and advertising, communication between onshore and offshore teachers and partner institutions (Bohm et al, 2002); ongoing reviews and improvements (Grayson, 2008); academic staff workload and academic standards in offshore teaching and assessments (Smith, 2009); staff professional development on cross-cultural issues (Dunn & Wallace, 2006) and teaching courses in languages other than English. These research findings along with the findings in this paper align with the recurring recommendations from external quality audits conducted by AUQA between 2002-2007. Recommendations which tie in closely to the findings in the survey are:

1. Leadership and university strategy for offshore education
2. Governance of offshore education and oversight by the relevant committees
3. Quality assurance processes for offshore courses/contracts and partnerships
4. Process for the review of offshore courses and partnerships
5. Consistency and equivalence of teaching and student experience (onshore vs offshore)
6. Monitoring of student performance e.g. retention, progression and satisfaction with onshore student cohort
7. Risk management processes for offshore partnerships
8. Criteria used to recruit offshore partners and agents
9. Criteria used to recruit offshore teaching staff
10. Quality assurance processes for marketing, admissions and credit transfer
11. Off-campus support for offshore students by the university and partner institution
12. Induction and cross-cultural training for teaching staff
13. Exit strategy used to cease offshore courses or partnerships
14. Resources and support for offshore students (e.g. learning support, library)
15. Communication between the university, offshore students and partner institutions

The findings of the survey align with AUQA cycle 1 recurring recommendations with improvements needed in five key areas. They include issues related to; local support by the partner institution related to AUQA recurring themes (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 14); resources and infrastructure such as computing facilities, range of library service like access to electronic materials from overseas and learning and study skills assistance related to AUQA recurring themes (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 13 and 14); course and assessment related issues such as electronic access to essential information and content for classes and timely and constructive feedback on assessment related to AUQA recurring themes (1, 2, 5 and 9).

The experience of the three universities included in this study and discussions with 10 other Australian universities suggest that AUQA audits have been effective in improving the quality assurance of offshore international education. Some of the contributing factors include: the focus of cycle 1 audit on offshore programs and partnerships with panel visits in offshore countries; audit panel meeting/interviews with students, staff, employers, alumni, senior managers from partner institutions and government officials, public audit reports highlighting significant deficiencies in the management of offshore programs, negative media stories related to offshore activities; the requirements placed on universities to close the loop and reporting on cycle 1 audit affirmations and recommendations 12 months after the release of the public report; governments decision to include internationalisation as a default theme in cycle two audits and finally audit panel follow up on selected affirmations and recommendations in cycle 2 audit.

An analysis of cycle 2 audit reports of public universities suggests the closure of many offshore programs and partnerships in all universities due to the alarming quality assurance problems identified
in cycle 1 audits conducted between 2002 and 2007. A number of negative media headlines as a result of audit outcome also showed the extent to which universities were mismanaging offshore components including headlines such as: cost, rivals force offshore reversal (The Australian, 2007), University offshore ops targeted; offshore lapses at the university; university ordered to amend Singapore campus ads (The Australian, 2004) and public-private pact under fire (The Australia, 2006). An analysis of AUQA cycle 1 audit reports related to internationalisation by Stella and Liston stated that “although Australian universities’ offshore programs cater for about one third of international university students, they are categorised as high risk because of the difficulty of managing these programs effectively”, (Stella & Liston, 2008, pp.10)

An analysis of the 19 cycle 2 AUQA audit reports of public universities in Australia conducted since 2007, shows significant progress made by some universities in strengthening quality assurance processes related to offshore programs and partnerships. While some institutions have used AUQA audit as a lever to enhance quality assurance of offshore education, the progress in other universities have been patchy. Some of the notable improvements are in areas such as; senior leadership in international education including offshore, risk management processes, quality assurance processes for offshore programs and partnerships, monitoring academic performance of offshore students and cross cultural training for teaching staff. Some of the areas where universities are yet to improve based on cycle 2 recurring recommendations include; the role and responsibilities of various committees responsible for the quality assurance of offshore programs, university strategy and direction for offshore education, English language proficiency for offshore students and lack of consistent admissions criteria, internationalisation of curriculum, learning and teaching resources and infrastructure with partner institutions, sharing of performance data such as student satisfaction with offshore partners and assessment moderation of offshore student assessments.

**Concluding Remarks**

Offshore students in the three universities appear to be satisfied with the following areas; teaching, course administration and management, and course outcomes.

The three areas where offshore student satisfaction is the lowest include;

1. Administrative areas (e.g. the library; local support by the partner organisation; information technology and computing facilities), as well as;
2. Solving administrative problems faced by offshore students on day-to-day basis, and;
3. Timely and constructive feedback on student assessment.

Improvements in these key areas are vital for universities to undertake in order to improve the experience for offshore students. Implementing improvements in the areas identified by the students as requiring attention requires a shared responsibility with partners involved in delivery as well as co-ordination across different areas of the university.

Despite the significant work that Australian Universities have undertaken around offshore education, this research indicates that there is further work needed to improve student satisfaction. Continuous monitoring of student satisfaction and areas for improvement provide universities with key data on the areas that need improvement. In line with this, offshore student satisfaction surveys as that carried out in the three universities in this study indicate that Universities still have room for improvement. Significant progress appears to have been made in a number of universities based on the outcomes of cycle 1 and 2 audit reports. The reputation of Australia Universities internationally is reliant on quality assurance and continuous improvements in the level of student satisfaction and responsiveness to concerns raised by students in offshore locations. Clearly, student feedback has gradually become an integral part of the continuous quality enhancement and assurance mechanism in higher education (Harvey 2003).
References


