FROM AUSTRALIA TO CHINA: IMPLEMENTING AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM AND QUALITY FRAMEWORKS OVERSEAS

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ABSTRACT

Transnational education is becoming an increasingly important part of the Australian tertiary education sector. This paper describes the experiences of an Australian vocational training provider delivering accredited courses through two vocational colleges in China. Four key strategies are presented that were employed to assure that Australian regulatory requirements were being met while acknowledging the need for customisation/contextualisation to the Chinese student cohort. The paper then considers further research in challenges facing tertiary education providers when delivering transnational education.

Key Words: transnational education, China, regulation, international students

INTRODUCTION

The global market for higher education continues to grow and expand, with Australian institutions often leading the expansion and South East Asia often absorbing the expansion (Dashwood et al., 2008; Mazzarol, Soutar & Seng, 2003; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). Although not as strong, there is similar growth and expansion in the secondary school and vocational training sectors (Bateman, 2007; Bunnell, 2008). Technology and globalisation further fuel international education growth across all sectors (Friedman, 2006; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Murphy & Gomes, 2003).

Australia, which is well positioned in the Asia Pacific region, has long acknowledged the importance of this growth and the need to assure the quality of delivery to onshore and offshore international students, such as establishing the Australian International Education Foundation in 1994. The Foundation became Australian Education International (AEI) in 1998, with a mandate to 'foster international partnerships, provide strategic policy advice, ensure quality, and enhance international students' experiences' (Australian Education International, nd). AIE released its Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) in 2005, updated in 2007, with principles applicable to higher education, vocational and technical education and schools education (International Education Association of Australia, 2008).

An underlying reason for the development of the TQS was that organisations face assimilation gaps in using an innovation (Fichman & Kemerer, 1999). Importantly, innovation diffusion research distinguishes between having an innovation, such as transnational education, and implementing the innovation (Rogers, 2003). Despite the importance of how organisations use innovations, adoption research is maturing relative to implementation research and implementation is a difficult process (Fichman, 2004; Jeyaraj, Rottman & Lacity, 2006). Implementation research should help organisations decide whether or not to adopt an innovation, as well as how to address implementation issues.

ASIA-PACIFIC CHRIE Macau 2013

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The 11th APacCHRIE Conference
Macau SAR, China

Most academic and applied literature on transnational education seems to focus on the Australian higher education sector, which has over 300,000 international students either studying onshore or at overseas campuses (Australian Education International, August 2012). Yet the vocational training sector is a dynamic area that merits additional research (Bateman, 2007) with nearly 200,000 international students under instruction (Australian Education International, July 2011). This paper helps expand research on the vocational training sector through a case study of an Australian vocational training provider's experience delivering transnational education in China. The diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003) serves as the theory to assist with the organisation's implementation of transnational education. The results add to the implementation research stream and give educational institutions insights for reducing transnational implementation issues, particularly in China.

METHODOLOGY

The case study in this paper covers two years while the Australian College of Applied Education (ACAE) was operating a transnational education program within two large Chinese Vocational Colleges. The methodology comprised gathering feedback from staff working in the transnational relationship and students in the Chinese cohort. Staff feedback was gathered at weekly meetings and student feedback through formal and informal surveys. The number of respondents was 140 students across the two locations. Data analysis was undertaken by the International Program Manager and co-author Vada Ng, who reported results at ACAE Management meetings on an ongoing and regular basis.

BACKGROUND

ACAE, located in Perth, has provided accredited vocational courses to domestic and international students since 1989. In August 2011, ACAE took the opportunity to take over an existing transnational education licence in China under the Sino-Australia initiative. ACAE signed an agreement with two Chinese institutions, located in Shanghai

and Nantong. Both institutions are large vocational training providers with experience offering international programs on campus. Shanghai Xinjiang College has 12,000 students across five departments with 47 students studying ACAE hospitality courses; Nantong Vocational College has 14,000 students across 10 departments with 92 students studying ACAE business and hospitality courses.

A key principle in the Australian government's Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) is that 'courses delivered transnationally should be equivalent in standards and outcomes to those delivered within Australia' (International Education Association of Australia, 2008). To ensure compliance with Australian regulation, ACAE faced the challenges of applying its Australian curriculum, policies and practices in China, with a limited understanding of China's educational complexities, cultural challenges, language and educational practices.

Despite the requirements that courses delivered transnationally be of an equivalent standard to those delivered within Australia, the vocational training regulatory framework does not mandate nor imply that approaches to learning and assessment should be the same across different student cohorts and contexts. Being 'comparable to' or 'equivalent to' does not mean 'the same as' and training providers should expect that onshore training and assessment delivery strategies will differ from those employed offshore (Bateman 2007, p.23). The National Quality Council (2009, p. 9) specifically cautions that when an offshore education partner requires a norm referenced assessment, there is often misunderstanding. The overseas teaching staff are often unfamiliar with Australian competency-based systems to deliver and assess vocational training, which is a risk. Countries where English is not the first language exacerbates the risk.

In planning delivery of vocational programs offshore, providers must take care to ensure that the units and elements of competency that make up accredited training package courses are relevant to the context in which the training and assessment is undertaken. Training packages designed for an Australian context can be problematic in a foreign context. Some competencies in Australian courses have questionable legal, cultural and industrial relevance to overseas students. The extent to which units can be contextualised is an issue of considerable discussion among providers and vocational training regulators.

THE ACAE EXPERIENCE

Similar to organisational adoption of other innovations, assimilation gaps arose after taking over the transnational program and during its implementation (Fichman & Kemerer, 1999). The Chinese institutes were at first under-equipped to support the practical nature of Australian vocational qualifications. ACAE had to negotiate with the Chinese partners over a new concept—taking students into industry to train them using commercial industry surroundings and equipment. Negotiations were also necessary to ensure appropriate student insurance throughout the course. This insurance was particularly challenging for off-campus industry participants.

In addition to unexpected issues, for ACAE to succeed offshore it had to address expected implementation issues. It was critical for ACAE to understand learner backgrounds and characteristics such as their literacy, language and numeracy level in order to enhance the learning experience and ensure quality outcomes. ACAE noted four key differences in vocational training between Australia and China. Firstly, China's educational system heavily tests student knowledge and skills in a study period's final two weeks. Secondly, Australia's competency based training and assessment differs from China's norm referenced/graded assessment. Thirdly and fourthly, and relative to Australians, the Chinese have poor English proficiency and poor understanding of the importance of Australian regulations, notably the rules of collecting evidence of competency.

Therefore, prior to "exporting" its programs offshore, it was necessary for ACAE to ensure that the strategies for training and assessment not only met the requirements of the relevant training package but were also "fair" with due consideration of reasonable adjustments to account for individual student needs. To meet the needs of its China cohort, ACAE revised its training and assessment practices to suit its partner schools by employing the following four key strategies.

Educating the China partners and China staff

An initial strategy involved providing training to equip offshore partners with an understanding of the Australian vocational training system, particularly the requirements

for competency-based assessment. This training was supplemented by coaching offshore partners to understand the progressive/formative assessment practice embedded in the ACAE Training and Assessment Schedules.

In addition to this it became evident that training was also required to enhance trainers understanding of cultural diversity and the Chinese education system. The International Programs Manager, who has significant experience managing Chinese language and cultural programs as part of her association with the Confucius Institute, played an important role in familiarising staff with the Chinese education system and many of the cultural challenges. Each China trainer was provided with ongoing support whereby a Perth-based trainer supported each China-based trainer by acting as a "buddy".

Although a necessary part of certain Australian training package courses, a key strategy involved explaining to the China institutions the intricacies of some core competencies that have little or no relevance in China. For example, Australia's Business Activity Statement (BAS) and Instalment Activity Statement (IAS) are foreign concepts to the Chinese. Similarly, most of the elements and performance criteria required of units relating to Occupational Health and Safety has a completely different meaning in China compared to standards required in Australia.

Contextualising training and assessment materials for the China market

As well as enhancing the understanding of offshore partners and trainers, a further important strategy was providing offshore partners and students with a bilingual ACAE Student Handbook explaining key areas such as the Australian vocational training system, principles of competency-based assessment, plagiarism, types of assessments, and support during their study.

This strategy also centred on contextualising assessment where appropriate, with the caveat that the International Program Manager and Perth-based Compliance Manager approved any amendments to ensure that assessments continued to meet the training package requirements and rules of assessment. One of these enhancements was providing assessment details in English and Chinese in order to help students better understand the assessment requirements. This also included making minor program

changes to suit the Chinese education system, such as ensuring most ACAE teaching concluded prior to the final examination week and conducting most written tests at the last week of the study period.

Quality assessment outcomes were assured through an added process whereby a third level of validation was implemented. The China-based assessor conducted the first level of validation followed by the China Academic Manager and finally by the International Programs Manager. All staff involved in training and assessment are required to hold a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as required by Australian regulation.

Assuring the quality of the China cohorts

Throughout, ACAE was mindful to ensure that the Chinese students' experience emulated to the best possible extent the experience of students studying in Australia. It was important to ensure students had the same quality and access to program managers, trainers, resources and support as in Australia. Doing reinforced ACAE's expectation for the Chinese students to demonstrate the same achievements and course outcomes as students studying in Australia. In addition, the Chinese students were continually encouraged to communicate through the LMS with Australian students.

A big part of the quality assurance strategy was to combat the increasing concern about plagiarism and academic dishonesty among international students studying in Western institutions, due to different cultural backgrounds and learning styles (Tran, 2012). In light of these concerns, ACAE embarked on educating students and China institution leaders that direct copying from the text or each other does not demonstrate competency, and, in general, copying is plagiarism.

Copying became a significant cultural challenge in moving students from rote learning to critical thinking. Furthermore, providers must expect unintended consequences. For example, sourcing and supplying teaching resources and texts that are mapped to or support the Training Package requirements in China proved almost impossible. This led to the added cost of supplying these from Australia.

Providing ACAE licensed software to the China institutions was also an obstacle that needed to be addressed and overcome in order to facilitate the training program by overcoming the challenges of installing and operating this software in China.

Managing inter-institutional communications and China institution norms

Looking holistically at the operational arrangements, significant challenges were encountered at the management level where, at the most basic level, it was obvious that in the initial stages the Chinese institutional leadership expected the right to control the course content, fees and general teaching and assessment practice. In order to mitigate this expectation of control, ACAE instigated an exhaustive process of inter-institutional communication, translating every conversation and document (at considerable expense).

ACAE management continually adapted courses on the fly to fit the flexible institutional systems in China. This adaptation included ensuring that the China institutions complied with the contractual requirements, frequent last minute operational changes, and working within the restrictive censorship environment imposed by the government and the institutions. For example, ACAE provided a Learning Management System (LMS) to support the delivery and management of the courses. Access to the LMS was limited and in many cases, simply not available to the Chinese student cohort.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has at least two limitations. Firstly, it is a case study of only one provider and the findings may not generalise to other providers. Secondly, there is a question of bias, as the authors are associated with the provider. Limitations aside, the paper adds to the current research of transnational vocational education and provides suggestions for implementing transnational education. Providers may draw on this paper to consider both adopting transnational partners and implementing their programs overseas.

The broad cultural difference of Chinese students moving towards thinking for themselves versus continuing their traditional rote learning style will challenge

transnational education providers for some time. Another expectation, that Chinese students pass and failure is not an option, exacerbates the cultural challenges.

To operate offshore effectively, Australian vocational training providers must implement strategies to contextualise their training and assessment practices to suit their overseas student cohorts and delivery partners, whilst constantly keeping an eye on the compliance requirements of the Australian regulatory framework.

Future research could embrace additional providers in a broader comparative case study. Future research could also go beyond the case studies and gather quantitative data such as success rates, retention rates and completion rates as well as the incidence of Chinese students articulating to study in Australia.

If Australian transnational education is to grow and survive, recommendations could lead to guidelines incorporating best practice to assist institutions to adapt Australian qualifications in a transnational context. These guidelines should overcome the documented challenges of imposing Australian qualification requirements that have little, or in many cases, no meaning in an international context.

Finally, the Australian and Chinese governments must work at the highest level to overcome the key challenge that ACAE, and all other private Australian education providers operating in China, face. For the Australian transnational education strategy to succeed, the Chinese government should recognise and list private providers on the official Jiaoyu Shewai Jianguan Xinxi Wang listing <www.jsj.edu.cn/index.php/default/news/index/222>, in addition to Australian public institutions. Without this recognition, Australian private offerings in China are only non-accredited courses outside of the Australian Qualifications Framework <www.aqf.edu.au>. With this barrier, private investment in the China market is likely to be short-term and expensive.

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