CASE STUDIES 2 AND 3: A MASS COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMME DELIVERED IN MALAYSIA AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY OFFSHORE CAMPUS

Introduction: Background & Context

This is an account of the application of the principles in a mass communications programme delivered at an Australian university offshore campus in Malaysia. The original intention was to make and report a case study of application by onshore staff working in the programme and a separate case study of application by academics delivering the programme in situ in Malaysia. However, the two groups of academics initiated a joint project so here it was judged appropriate to present the two ‘cases’ in a single discussion.

As a mode of programme delivery, the offshore campus plays an important role in Australian university TNE. It enables Australian universities to create a focal delivery point for their offshore programmes. It also accommodates the expansion of operations and university ambitions to internationalise their operations and can serve to promote the university name in overseas markets. The offshore campus offers the most significant testament to the importance of delivering consistent quality in TNE learning and teaching, as institutional reputations have foundered when offshore campuses carrying Australian university names have been the subject of quality criticisms.

Most offshore campuses are founded in partnership between the Australian provider and one or more partners based in the country of delivery. The offshore campus in this discussion is representative of this practice, constituted as a result of collaboration between a number of Malaysian government and business interests and an Australian university. The campus has been in operation for a number of years. The mass communication programme was established two years after the foundation of the campus. In terms of staffing and student numbers, it was, at the time of the study, one of the largest programmes delivered at the campus.

Staff employed to teach the programme directly at the campus feature in this study. For convenience, these participants are identified as ‘offshore’. The other key group of stakeholders was staff at the Australian university committed to the delivery of the programme. These academics are identified as ‘onshore’. Those engaged in programme delivery onshore were the programme coordinator, who also coordinated one unit in the programme, and five unit controllers. The offshore composition was four full-time lecturers and four part-time tutors. The difference in employment status is worth identifying because obligations and responsibilities in relation to enabling quality in TNE can be expected to devolve somewhat differently between full-time and part-time staff.

The mass communications programme, which leads to a Bachelor of Arts degree, is owned by the onshore ‘campus’ (university). The programme is delivered over three years.
at the offshore campus, with some opportunity for students to undertake part of their studies (often the final year) at the Australian campus. At the commencement of semester, onshore unit coordinators deliver, by a mix of courier mail and email, course outlines, reading lists, details of assessment and related teaching and learning materials to those offshore lecturers and/or tutors teaching their courses at the campus. These offshore academics are employees of the offshore campus, though their appointment is made through onshore/offshore negotiation and is always subject to the approval of the programme coordinator at the Australian campus. The programme is staffed at the campus by a core of full-time lecturer-level academics, supplemented by part-time tutors. In terms of programme delivery, the line of division of labour therefore, could be thought to be between onshore coordination and offshore classroom teaching. However, matters are not quite that simple. The programme has a commitment to supply ‘teaching visits’ from onshore staff. Also, full-time lecturers working in the programme at the offshore campus act as local coordinators. This particular role is a consequence of the mode of delivery. The existence of the institution, the offshore campus itself, invites the need for local coordination. The predominant format for programme delivery is the unit lecture followed by either workshops or tutorials. The programme is open to international enrolment. This has important consequences for classroom learning and teaching, as discussed in the section below.

The impact of cultural context on programme teaching and learning

Almost 35 per cent of enrolment in the programme is supplied by non-Malaysian students. Many of these students come from countries in the Asian region. There are also African students enrolled and students with Western passports. (It is not unusual for Australian offshore campus programmes to have representatively-international student contingents.) Offshore educators had a particular take on the significance of the student make-up. They believed that, typically, their Malaysian students had different learning goals and learning orientations to the students of other nationalities studying in the programme. They thought the Malaysian students typically were focused on learning how to pass examinations. Their incremental goals were examination successes. Ultimately, in the words of the educators, these students ‘wanted a degree’. They sought qualifications to help them find employment in international (multi-national) corporations operating in Malaysia.

The academics considered that, typically, for the non-Malaysian students, the key learning objective was to transform and enrich the self in a very particular way; to shed provinciality from character and develop an international outlook. The non-Malaysian students typically positioned the value of learning in the programme in terms of their exposure to international ways of thinking and doing. Educators maintained that as a consequence of the two ‘populations’, the Malaysian and non-Malaysian students, valuing learning on different terms and pursuing different learning objectives, programme activities were frequently interpreted differently. In particular, the two populations varied in their reaction to educational challenges and new learning experiences. Educators said that the non-Malaysian students generally sought new learning experiences and were appreciative of being challenged as long as they could see that learning imperatives were
Student culture was, of course, not the only cultural context impacting on teaching and learning. Academics in the project uniformly agreed on the necessity of ensuring programme content harmonised with the Malaysian cultural environment. There was a strong conviction that care had to be taken not only to make the curriculum understandable in the Malaysian cultural context but to ensure that it presented no offence to ‘local’ mores and values. Professional culture also impacted on learning/teaching. It was quite common in the programme for teaching staff to be non-Malaysian. There were, for example, lecturers or tutors from the sub-continent of Asia, the Middle East and Europe. As a concrete example of how professional culture impacted on teaching and learning, one lecturer with a background of educational training and teaching in Europe, indicated that previous experience did not include the tutorial format. Some of the Malaysian educators had experience of what was frequently termed ‘the Australian system’, but others, in particular part-time staff, did not. Onshore academics tended to expect that the programme be delivered with the same teaching and learning activities (for example, small group work) characteristic of programme delivery at the ‘home’ campus in Australia. That is, while they believed that care needed to be taken to ensure a culturally relevant and culturally sensitive, they did not see an equivalent need to match teaching/learning activities to cultural context. Conversely, offshore academics strongly believed that teaching/learning had to accommodate cultural tradition, particularly educational history, experience and expectation.

**The pursuit of quality in teaching and learning**

All academics involved in the study emphasised the value of good and stable relations between onshore and offshore counterparts for enabling and ensuring quality in the delivery of the programme. There was general belief that quality required an effective pairing of onshore and offshore academics, working together over time. A state of trust between onshore/offshore educators was identified as critical to enabling quality in programme delivery. Academics believed that in the interests of quality, efforts should be made to build and maintain effective working relationships between, for example, an onshore unit controller and tutors or lecturers working on unit delivery offshore. The curriculum was consistently identified as contributing to quality teaching/learning and programme quality generally. The argument offshore and onshore was that it delivered quality because it was ‘the same’ curriculum provided at the Australian campus. However, there was a firm understanding offshore, and, with more muted sentiment, onshore, that the curriculum should acknowledge and respond to cultural context. On the one hand academics, particularly those onshore, saw reproduction of the onshore curriculum relevant to their quest to be personally transformed, to become ‘citizens of the world’. The Malaysian students, it was claimed, tended to be quicker to position new learning demands as potential obstacles to graduation. Effectively therefore, from the viewpoint of the offshore educators, the internationalised student body, itself generated by and a feature of the offshore campus, created a particular cultural context that impacted on teaching and learning. In terms of learning needs, learning pursuits and learning motivation, there were, in effect, two student cultures and ‘two kinds’ of students in the classroom.
offshore as a quality guarantee and on the other hand, saw ‘exact’ or identical reproduction as deflecting from quality. Academics recognised the paradox in their thinking and addressed it by maintaining that the curriculum delivered offshore should be the same as the curriculum onshore with adjustments to syllabus content to ensure cultural relevance and awareness. That is, they accepted the possibility of equivalence.

At both campuses there were formal mechanisms for reviewing and assuring programme quality. There were scheduled meetings for staff involved in the programme to discuss and identify and quality issues or challenges. Onshore, these meetings were chaired by the programme coordinator and offshore by the relevant department head. At both campuses, there were routine meetings of ‘international’ committees which served as forums for discussion about programme delivery and quality assurance. The programme at both ‘ends’ was also exposed to national auditing bodies. There were also formal moderation practices for the delivery of TNE programmes at the offshore campus. There were requirements that offshore academics should deliver full examples of their marked student work to their onshore colleagues for moderation and feedback prior to the final awarding of grades and the return of work to students. Onshore staff also attended the Board of Examiners at the offshore campus and reviewed grades and student work while in situ. There was a formal requirement for teaching visits, with the understanding that these visits would aid in quality assurance of teaching and learning. It was also required that each delivery of a unit offshore should be accompanied by the use of survey mediums to assess student satisfaction with teaching and learning. Typically, academics expressed uncertainty about the exact nature of quality assurance mechanisms in place to safeguard programme quality. Moderation and student satisfaction surveys were usually rapidly identified, but then there would often be a vacuum. The more junior the academic in employment level or status or in experience in TNE programme delivery, the less likely would there be an identification of quality assurance mechanisms beyond moderation and student satisfaction surveys. Of particular relevance to this study, no academic canvassed could identify any sets of quality principles or framework of quality principles in use to assure quality in teaching and learning in TNE delivery.

**Challenges to delivering quality teaching and learning**

All parties believed quality learning/teaching could not be achieved and sustained in the programme without effective collaboration between onshore and offshore academics, particularly within units. How to effect successful collaboration across the geographical divide was identified as a critical challenge to quality in delivery. Academics on both sides of the ‘divide’ agreed that there was a need for more structure to the onshore/offshore relationship to promote effective collaboration. At present, they said, how collaboration was negotiated was ‘left to the individuals involved’. The only real process or structure associated with this approach was an expectation/requirement within the programme for regular email contact between onshore and offshore staff engaged in the delivery of a unit. Onshore and offshore, there were observations that when staff exited units the challenges to delivering quality intensified as relationships had to be forged with new staff. Part-time employment was recognised as a particular threat to stable and effective collaboration.
Academics onshore also said that they saw service to the onshore version of the programme and its clientele as their primary responsibility, acknowledging they could give limited time to building relationships with offshore academics. Offshore academics said that because enrolments in programmes often altered dramatically from year to year and new programmes introduced had to be staffed, they were often required to move from teaching in one area to another, undermining the process of developing stable relationships within units. Academics onshore and offshore also stressed that there were challenges to delivering quality learning and teaching in that staff employed offshore to teach the programme often did not have much familiarity with ‘Australian tertiary education practices and approaches’. A range of examples were given of ‘Australian’ pedagogy that could be unfamiliar. These included student presentations, multiple choice examinations, written, diagnostic feedback on student work and even the tutorial format. The purposes and practices of the latter, for example, were said to be foreign to academics who had studied and taught in education systems utilising only lecturing modes of delivery.

The issue of fitting curriculum to context featured heavily in descriptions of quality challenges. Academics onshore and offshore believed that quality teaching and learning required a culturally relevant curriculum. The approach relied upon for delivering this began with the practice whereby unit coordinators onshore couriered and emailed unit syllabus material offshore for feedback from unit deliverers in Malaysia. Typically, no feedback suggesting amendments was heard from the offshore academics until the semester’s teaching was well underway. Then, if there was feedback, it usually came in the request for permission to substitute a reading, a film or an activity. No-one in the study saw this approach as any kind of guarantee of quality in delivery. Onshore academics saw it as haphazard and requiring experienced staff offshore. Academics offshore said they were often hesitant to raise matters because they feared appearing critical of the coordinators who had developed syllabi and curriculum. They also saw the process as uncertain as it was dependent on ‘the offshore lecturer or tutor’s personal initiative and the onshore coordinator’s willingness to allow modifications’. The offshore academics believed that while the curriculum was ‘very good’ because it was the curriculum delivered by the university in Australia, there were areas where student learning suffered because of its ‘Australian’ content and style. From the perspective of offshore academics, the quality problem in delivering the received curriculum was that it was ‘developed, designed and produced first and foremost for students at the Australian campus’. One lecturer who had been teaching in the programme for several years remarked that ‘while the curriculum is generally good it has topics, readings, case studies and analytical texts and sets of skill demands and values that are of little relevance, or else are socio-culturally insensitive, to locally-based students, lecturers and tutors”. The offshore academics maintained that ‘disparity, irrelevance and insensitivity’ in the curriculum translated in student satisfaction surveys to criticism not only of the unit and its content but the educators themselves. Teaching, learning and educator morale were damaged as a result of cultural misalignments in what was otherwise acknowledged to be a very good curriculum.
How participants responded to the framework of principles

At the workshops (held at both the onshore and offshore campuses), academics were exposed to the set of principles for delivering quality in TNE teaching/learning and asked to consider whether the principles were relevant to their own practices. The first of the two workshops took place offshore. At this workshop, academics focused particularly on principles that they saw as related to ensuring a ‘culturally sensitive’ curriculum, which they agreed, was what they needed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning experiences and learning outcomes. The conviction was that it would be valuable to teaching/learning quality to embed these principles more thoroughly into practice. Attendees at the onshore workshop were also particularly interested in grounding principles that applied to curriculum more thoroughly into practice. They believed that one area in which they were particularly exposed in terms of ensuring quality teaching and learning in the programme was in the matter of aligning the curriculum to cultural context. As mentioned, the view onshore and offshore was that the method of relying on offshore staff to raise matters and on onshore staff to agree to changes was too haphazard an approach to ensure programme delivery quality.

Academics at the second workshop, the ‘onshore’ workshop, explained that in the interim between the two workshop deliveries there had been substantial discussion across the ‘divide’ about the offshore workshop and the ideas participants had drawn from it and there had developed a consensus that onshore and offshore staff should work and collaborate on finding ways to express and/or more thoroughly incorporate the principles associated with curriculum implementation/adjustment into their practices. With endorsement from the entire group at the onshore workshop, one academic explained, ‘we have seized on the curriculum-in-context principles because we see them as something to give us confidence and direction in an area none of us have been quite satisfied with’. Onshore academics also supported the offshore position that the mapping of principles to practice should be planned for all units in the programme. At the onshore workshop, academics explained that while the workshop itself had lead them to see ‘more clearly, quality principles we need to embrace more fully and more formally, right across the spectrum of our activities’, focusing on quality enhancement of curriculum adjustment was ‘practical’ in the time space available and in terms of workload. It was advised that a full revision of the curriculum might take some years to achieve as there were various compliance requirements external to the programme. However, ‘adaptation’ could be legitimately managed internally. The principles that academics across the workshops identified as important for consideration in respect to their desire to enhance and assure quality in the programme curriculum are listed below.

Cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation of course material, its delivery and the assessment of students’ work.

Curriculum design and delivery should be responsive to local offshore policies, practices and procedures to enhance student engagement.
Curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evince clear quality controls.

Offshore staff should have autonomy in adapting the curriculum to suit the local context and the culturally diverse backgrounds of students. Teaching materials should reflect the cultural context of the course and provide an international dimension to the curriculum.

There should be clear guidelines for curriculum implementation, curriculum adaptation and curriculum renewal.

Units delivered both offshore and onshore should be equivalent, rather than necessarily identical to each other. Unit outlines, topics and learning outcomes should be the same, but curriculum content and pedagogical practice should be adapted to suit cultural differences.

Action Learning Project

The development of an Action Learning plan to implement the principles

With general agreement to implement the curriculum principles as a course for programme adaptation, attention turned to the question of method. For adaptation, academics judged particularly useful the first, fourth and last principle listed above. The shared view was that staff should work on ensuring the cultural relevance of the programme, and at the same time, to ensure the programme maintained its internal integrity, also work on ensuring ‘equivalence’. For onshore staff, the aim was interpreted essentially as work to ensure ‘cultural relevance’. The onshore academics initially conceptualised Action Learning goals in terms of the substitution of relevant ‘local’ examples and case studies for irrelevant teaching/learning content. The principle of a ‘cultural sensitive’ curriculum struck a particular chord with the offshore academics. There were a number of accounts given of teaching/learning experiences that suffered because of cultural ‘insensitivity’ in the curriculum. A Film Studies curriculum segment on ‘queer theory’ was one example offered of cultural insensitivity. A requirement to examine the debate over carbon tax was another example. Offshore academics also believed that the units they taught also failed the ‘cultural context’ test because they did not promote knowledge, values and skills relevant to local industry needs.

Almost immediately, participants found that the sub-principle that stated offshore staff ‘should have autonomy in adapting the curriculum to suit local context’ put ‘too much burden on offshore staff’ and weighed against the established belief that the best way to ensure quality in learning and teaching was through effective collaboration. There was swift agreement, achieved via the relay by email of a canvas of views onshore and also offshore that the re-design of the curriculum should be undertaken, as much as possible, as a fully collaborative engagement. There was general agreement too, that the requirement in that particular principle to ‘provide an international dimension to the curriculum’ validated the involvement of both onshore and offshore academics in curriculum adaptation. This principle, it was agreed, also provided a guide to how to proceed with adaptation. It suggested the approach to take in relation to topic coverage was to incorporate and juxtapose multiple and diverse perspectives, values, practices and experiences. The academics decided that principles of ‘cultural sensitivity’ and ‘international dimensions’ directed them to incorporation of the Australian, ‘local’ and salient ‘international’ views, values and practices. They also found that these principles
encouraged them to factor into their considerations on change, student expectations based on prior learning.

There was uniform agreement that one Action Learning plan was appropriate for the planned project of curriculum adjustment. Academics essentially felt that this approach would ensure that curriculum adjustment was holistic and oriented to set and agreed goals. They maintained that the principle that cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation and delivery of the curriculum logically suggested collaboration between (original) designers and deliverers. They also saw a concerted approach to curriculum renovation supported by the principle that ‘curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evince clear quality controls’. Initially, then, the early stages of the Action Learning plan developed through the workshops with follow-up onshore/offshore consultation looked like this:

**Action desirable**
Construction of a culturally sensitive and internationalised programme curriculum

**Principles applicable**
Focus on principles applying to curriculum. Particular attention to grounding the following principles

- Cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation of course material, its delivery and the assessment of students’ work.

- Curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evince clear quality controls. Teaching materials should reflect the cultural context of the course and provide an international dimension to the curriculum.

- Units delivered both offshore and onshore should be equivalent, rather than necessarily identical to each other. Unit outlines, topics and learning outcomes should be the same, but curriculum content and pedagogical practice should be adapted to suit cultural differences.

**Who is involved**
All onshore/offshore academics currently involved with the programme.

**General plan of action**
Onshore and offshore unit deliverers are to jointly engage in unit curriculum renovation. The set task will be to (a) replace curriculum material, values and skill sets identified as culturally insensitive with material that is culturally appropriate and (b) augment or balance ‘Australian-centric’ perspectives, practices and experiences with relevant international examples. Progress of renovation to be monitored and evaluated through regular (three weekly) progress reports developed consultatively by unit staff and made available via email through the programme coordinator to all academics working in the programme. Review and evaluation meetings: (2 – penultimate and final) by committee of offshore/onshore academics (conferencing).
**Course of Action**

As unit deliverers tackled the task of curriculum adaptation, an issue emerged. There was general uncertainty about how exactly the process of adaptation should unfold. The imperative of providing an ‘international dimension’ provided useful structure, but academics generally felt a need for more information. There were also concerns that divergent approaches to curriculum renewal would result in a disjointed and/or repetitive curriculum. The academics consulted the principles again, and recognised an available solution to their problems in mapping on to practice the principle that **there should be clear guidelines for curriculum implementation, curriculum adaptation and curriculum renewal.** Ultimately, the academics engaged with the programme developed an Action Learning plan with two aims: to generate a programme curriculum with international dimensions and with cultural sensitivity; and to establish guidelines for future curriculum adaptation/renewal. It was agreed that the formulation of guidelines should be the work of the review committees. The academics decided that the specifics of the task should involve determining (a) what the general nature of adaptation should involve, (b) when adaptation should occur, (c) who should be involved and in what capacities and (d) how adaptation should be monitored and evaluated. The precise guidelines on these matters were to be drawn up over the course of the meetings, or developed through the review committee. They would then be utilised for revision of the curriculum following its trial implementation in 2013 and then re-evaluated by review committee.

The work of implementing the Action plan took place from late March to early June. During this period, volunteers identified at the workshops maintained email and telephone contact with this researcher, detailing the progress of the project. A Final Report on the project, prepared by the onshore programme coordinator and endorsed by all academics involved in the final evaluative conferencing meeting in June was presented to the researcher. This report supported by the notes of various discussions held with academics engaged in the project forms the substance for the analysis that follows.

**Outcome of the Action Learning project**

Curriculum renewal to embrace and reflect quality principles was reported as successful but incomplete. The report indicated that the time frame the academics had allotted for the work had allowed for significant curriculum change across all units, but there was recognition in several units of the need to do more, particularly in respect to locating Australian-specific practice in a broader, international context of practice. Efforts to generate a curriculum that was culturally responsive to ‘local’ context were judged particularly effective. The shared view was that this work had significantly improved the quality of the curriculum and provided for better learning and teaching experiences and outcomes.

The second objective of the project, to draw up guidelines for adaptation/renewal of the curriculum, was fully achieved. These guidelines include a requirement to utilise the quality framework principles. The report noted that there was a strong endorsement of the guidelines and suggested that this support was not only evidence of the need for the guidelines but also due to the collaborative, inclusive approach to their construction and
their grounding in the work of project curriculum adaptation. The report identified other dividends from the project. Exposure to the quality framework encouraged academics to think about how they approached quality. The framework gave them something to weigh and measure their activities by. Most importantly, it provided much needed direction, manifesting as a tool to help academics meet their felt obligation to deliver quality teaching/learning. The report emphasised that academics found application of the principles in the project professionally satisfying. Application allowed them to not only meaningfully improve quality but to express their commitment to delivering quality. Embedding principles gave academics confidence that they were achieving quality enhancement. This benefited morale and also confidence in programme quality.

The pursuit of ‘cultural sensitivity’ and equivalence encouraged meaningful onshore/offshore collaboration, highlighted the professionalism of academics offshore to academics onshore and vice versa and built cross-cultural awareness. The report noted that the principles of ‘cultural sensitivity’, ‘international dimension’ and ‘equivalence’ had lead academics to a new appreciation of the need to build learning demands on student experience. The ‘old’ curriculum, it was maintained, had essentially ignored educational traditions outside the Australian approach. The revised curriculum recognised students’ diverse educational histories by taking a ‘scaffold’ approach to learning. From the viewpoint of practitioners involved, the project provided much-needed clarity on how to pursue the professional obligation to deliver quality in teaching and learning.

**Conclusions on the Case Studies in relation to the ALTC Project Objective**

The framework was a vital and valuable contribution to achieving quality in teaching and learning and to meeting the need to be able to lay claim to delivering this quality. Real gains were made to product in terms of the quality of the programme curriculum and to process through the design and adoption of guidelines to facilitate programme adaptation and renewal. Offshore/onshore relationships, vital to the quality enterprise, were strengthened and embedding the principles built confidence in programme quality and lifted educator morale. Participants in the studies found that curriculum adaptation was most effectively accomplished through collegial cooperation. This suggests that the ALTC project researchers may need to refine the principle that offshore staff ‘should have autonomy’ in curriculum adaptation. In general, however, the case studies sustain the goal and the method of the ALTC project. Academics onshore and offshore saw the quality framework as a boon for their practice. Application of the principles was approached with direct attention to quality needs. Collaboration was extremely productive. In the end, in respect to the education quality agenda in TNE, the case studies testify to the value of providing academics with access to quality frameworks directly addressing the challenges of TNE teaching/learning and to treating the implementation of principles as a matter of facilitating academics to deliver on their professional obligation to pursue quality in educational delivery.