CASE STUDY 4: AN UNDERGRADUATE COMMUNICATION SKILLS PROGRAMME DELIVERED AT A MALAYSIAN BRANCH CAMPUS OF AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Introduction: Background and Context
This case study is of the application of principles in an undergraduate communication skills programme delivered at a Malaysian branch campus of an Australian university. The campus was established through a partnership between the Australian university and Malaysian interests and has been operating for almost a decade. Its student clientele include non-Malaysian (approximately 35%) and Malaysian students. The campus offers a spread of programmes from business and engineering, to science, health, education, architecture and media. These programmes are drawn from the range of programmes provided at the ‘home’ campus of the Australian university. The branch campus programmes are owned by the Australian university (rather than by the consortium). Teaching at the campus is mainly undertaken by locally-hired academics. Academics from the Australian campus may conduct some teaching through ‘teaching visits’. However, their primary responsibilities usually involve coordination of programmes and/or units. They provide course material, support offshore staff and have the final say on student grades and marks.

The communications skills programme has been offered at the campus for five years. Its role is to service the other programmes delivered at the campus. It seeks to develop communication skills in research and in written and oral presentations in the context of professional discourses and associated lifelong learning practices. To provide this versatility to address diverse area teaching/learning needs, the communication skills programme comprises a suite of units. It includes a unit addressing communication skills in formal writing, a unit dealing with verbal communication skills and a unit addressing online communication skills. The latter unit, for example, is tailored in one media programme to be a unit on communication skills in ‘social media’ usage.

The full component of programme onshore coordinators, that is the programme coordinator and four unit coordinators, participated in this study. The programme coordinator also coordinated a unit in the programme. The other coordinators each had responsibility for one or more of the programme units delivered at the Malaysian campus. At the time of the study, at the beginning of a new year’s teaching semester, three of the participants had two or more years of experience of coordination in the programme at the branch campus, while one was commencing a second year of coordination and another was undertaking offshore coordination for the first time. All of the participants had commitments in the semester to coordinating and teaching in programmes delivered at the home campus.

Action Learning Project
Exposed to the quality principles framework in the workshop session, the onshore academics gravitated towards the principles advocating professional development and comprehensive training for academics engaged in offshore programme delivery. These principles they saw as speaking directly to problems confronting them as coordinators of units delivered offshore. The academics were strongly of the view that as they were delivering ‘their programme’ overseas they were charged by the university with responsibility for the quality of the teaching/learning delivered through the programme to students at the branch campus. Their key theme however, was that because of a lack
of appropriate training and professional development to deal with what they saw as unique teaching/learning demands, they were not confident they could ensure this educational quality.

That ‘Formal comprehensive training of staff engaged to provide offshore teaching should take place before their deployment commences’ animated discussion. It was a principle strongly endorsed by the group. Three of the participants had experienced a University induction course in offshore delivery. The course took the form of an online programme. The participants who had undertaken training maintained that the website training was oriented ‘towards the acquisition of cultural knowledge’. They said the training was largely about instilling or encouraging cultural awareness in educators. One example they provided was that the training course sought to educate on the ‘learning characteristics of Asian students’. Using the principle identified to make their point, the participants maintained that the induction programme had been of little help in preparing them to undertake or be responsible for ‘offshore teaching’.

One of the academics who had been through the induction course held up the workshop materials and said ‘we could have used these principles’. This comment generated a group discussion about what was needed in induction. Ultimately, the consensus was that prior to offshore coordination engagement, academics should be provided with what one participant described as ‘guidelines on principled practice’. The group eventually agreed on the statement that coordinators’ should be given access to quality principles to serve as guidelines for practice and also be fully advised on approaches that support/endorse these principles’.

The two participants who had not undertaken the programme advised they had commenced offshore coordination before the induction course was made available. They said that undertaking offshore coordination created immediate quality control problems for them. To that date, their commitment had been to students and programmes at the Australian campus. Their strategies for ensuring quality were honed with this focus. They sought to ensure and enact quality through ‘close contact with tutors, students and with teaching and learning activities’. Offshore coordination raised the urgent question of ‘how quality was to be provided out of our sight’. The two academics claimed they quickly came to realise that there were complex challenges to ensuring the quality of offshore teaching/learning and to offshore coordination. Said one, ‘we need some guidelines on how to go about offshore coordination so that we could confidently approach the matter of delivering quality, but we had no help other than advice from colleagues who were, like us, trying to learn on the job’. The discussion on this principle terminated with the group agreeing that ‘comprehensive induction training is essential to equip academics to meet their professional responsibility to ensure quality at an educational, cultural and geographic remove’.

The second of the staff development principles to attract vigorous discussion was ‘All staff, including those newly appointed and those experienced in offshore work, should be provided with professional development covering all aspects of offshore experience at least annually’. The academics were in full agreement that recurring professional development was essential. The four with offshore coordination experience said that questions of practice to be followed in the context of the goal of quality delivery emerged all the time. They supported this claim by identifying various issues that confronted them in coordinating in the programme. How was education quality to be
pursued, enhanced and ensured in the coordinator-tutor relationship? What relationship practices would best provide for quality in educational activities and outcomes? How was quality to be maintained in learning? How often should teaching visits occur? How should evaluations of units occur? Who should be involved in unit design?

The view at the workshop was that staff development had to be significantly improved to meet the needs of academics grappling with the problem of coordinating for quality educational delivery offshore. The academics were keen to ‘action’ the staff development principles in the quality framework. While they saw staff development as, fundamentally, a responsibility of the University, they thought the quality framework gave them an opportunity to be pro-active about their own professional development. They decided they could take the principles and use them to build an approach to coordination that was oriented very directly and explicitly to the provision of educational quality. They determined that what would be of value to them was an Action Learning project aimed at ensuring coordination roles and activities were clearly oriented to delivering and ensuring educational quality.

At the workshop, they then embarked on a process of trying to pick out principles from the quality framework, from pedagogy, welfare and curriculum areas, that they thought could be invoked in some fashion in the context of determining good coordination practice. Eventually, so many principles had been selected as relevant that they decided it made sense to use the whole framework as a guide to ensuring that their coordination activities and approaches would be comprehensively and transparently geared to engendering quality in educational delivery in the programme. In this respect, there was some discussion on whether the Action Learning project should address offshore coordination per se. However, the academics decided the project would be more effective and relevant if it targeted their direct needs in respect to the communication skills programme.

There was also a common view that if they could ensure practice in onshore coordination of the communication skills programme was supported by principles, the approaches determined might be, in some instances and to some extent, ‘transferable’ to other offshore roles and contexts. Although the academics agreed that through the project they might develop staff development material of potential value to a broader audience in the University, their fundamental concern was that they develop a strategy for coordination in the programme that ensured quality enhancement and that evidenced their systematic pursuit of quality. The academics agreed they should collaborate on the project, as they were all engaged in coordination in the programme. They also thought this made sense since they wanted to make sure all practices of coordination across the programme reflected and enacted quality principles. The group experimented with various ways to identify the aim of their project, using the framework and the two statements they had developed in their discussions as aids to this cause.

The Action Learning Project finally determined by the academics at the workshop was to inform coordination approaches and practices in the communication skills programme delivered at (the branch campus) in Malaysia with principles of quality from the quality framework. The plan was to generate a set of procedures for coordination of that programme that mapped onto the quality framework.
It was agreed at the workshop that the project should be carried out through a series of meetings and follow-up work over a period of ten weeks. It was felt that this time allocation would be sufficient for the work and would generate a set of procedures that could be trialled in programme coordination in the second semester. The group envisaged five one-two hour meetings at approximately fortnightly intervals. Four of the meetings were cast as ‘design’ meetings and the final meeting as a ‘review of the procedural approach developed’. The description that follows, of the carriage of the project and findings and conclusions of the participants involved, is drawn from email contact between the participants and the researcher during the life of the project and especially from the final report on the project made available to the researcher by the programme coordinator.

The purposes of the first meeting of the group were seen as organisational, ‘to plot the path forward’ was one description employed. It was quickly decided that the creation of a set of procedures mapped to a quality framework implied that re-casting, modification or refinement of existing practices would be necessary. This suggested to the working party that they could move forward using two key questions. These questions were ‘What are we doing? What should we be doing?’ Over the course of this meeting and the next, the academics thoroughly familiarised themselves with the quality framework. They also drew up what the report described as ‘a fairly comprehensive summary of the nature of coordination work in the programme’. The report mentioned that the academics found the quality framework of considerable assistance in helping them establish the extent of their own coordination activities.

The next two meetings (and follow-up activities) were focused entirely on generating coordination procedures that endorsed and reflected principles from the framework. In practice, the academics proceeded by methodically working through their ‘list’ of current coordination procedures, examining these procedures ‘in the light’ of the quality principles. Examples drawn from the report follow. Moderating marks and grades and supplying feedback to tutors working in the units of the programme at the Malaysian campus were identified by the team as current coordination responsibilities. The principle ‘In respect to the assessment of student work, feedback and moderation processes should be monitored for effectiveness’ was used by the academics both to specify a procedural area (feedback and moderation processes) and a quality requirement (monitor for effectiveness). The academics used the principle to identify a shortfall in their quality approach. They found they were practicing moderation and feedback but not monitoring the effectiveness of their practice. They discussed how ‘effectiveness’ could be determined. They decided evaluations of the effectiveness of feedback, for example, could be made on the basis of the transformation achieved in practice. They therefore introduced into the procedural area of ‘feedback and moderation’ the requirement that coordinators would formally monitor responsiveness to feedback. They also set ‘effectiveness of moderation and feedback’ as a staple agenda item for programme coordination end-of-semester review meetings. It needs to be stressed here that the academics considered moderation and feedback, and the other ‘coordinating procedures’ they held on their ‘list’, in terms of the quality framework. The mapping of practice to principle described above is offered simply to illustrate their approach. In determining what they ‘should be’ doing in respect to ensuring transparent quality in their procedures on moderation and feedback, for example, the academics also made use of the principle of ‘routine’ teaching visits and teaching exchanges, and the principle that ‘programme evaluations should be responsive to the views of both onshore and offshore
academic stakeholders’. In respect to the latter matter, for example, they amended an assessment form to give tutors the opportunity to respond in writing to coordination feedback and moderation.

The academics made use of the quality framework to house various of their activities under the procedural heading of ‘onshore/offshore teaching relationships. They then considered their coordination activities in this area in the light of the principle that ‘Provision should be made to ensure teaching delivery is underpinned by strong teaching relationships between staff in Australia and those based permanently offshore’. They then set about working out what changes to their existing coordination approaches would promote ‘strong’ onshore/offshore teaching relationships both consistently and across the whole programme. They used the quality framework as an ally in this work. They decided, for example, that teaching relationships would prosper if they formalised ‘communication protocols’ to ensure routine and agenda-driven, onshore/offshore coordinator-tutor communications.

Following the framework, procedures were set up, for example, for ‘ensuring’ that the curriculum packages delivered through coordination would be ‘comprehensive’ and that students were provided with access to appropriate resources. By the conclusion of the final meeting, the group was satisfied that the project had been successfully completed. The report noted, ‘The project’s outcome is we now have a set of procedures fully informed by quality considerations and objectives. What we have created is a rationale design for pursuing the quality agenda. We can now implement coordination with the confidence that the procedures we have developed will promote and safeguard educational quality in the programme.’ The report concluded by noting that the new set of procedures would be applied in the following semester in the delivery of the programme. The academics planned to arrange meetings during and at the end of the semester to ‘monitor the effectiveness’ of the implementation, as the report noted ‘as per the principles expressed in the quality framework’.

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

The broad objective of the ALTC project was to embed quality principles into Australian university TNE practice. The application of the principles in coordination practice, developed through the Action Learning project carried out by the participants in this study, is a contribution towards this outcome. The ALTC project, however, always anticipated that the quality framework introduced in the project would simply augment existing quality frameworks. Critically, none of the academics in the study had any experience of an existing quality framework (with due allowance for the induction programme). At the workshop, the quality framework was regarded as a valuable novelty. Application of principles from a quality framework was also a new enterprise for the academics in the study. Most, if not all, Australian universities claim to have quality frameworks for ‘offshore’ teaching and learning. A question that arises from this case study is, whether academics working in TNE are exposed to these frameworks and encouraged to apply the principles to their practice.

The key strategy towards achieving the ALTC projective objective was facilitation. Academics were to be enabled through the workshops and through exposure to the ‘contributary’ framework to apply principles as dictated by their professional needs and determined by their judgment. That is, the project strategy relied heavily on the professionalism of academics and it assumed they had quality needs and concerns. The
academics who generated this Action Learning project and its outcome were enthusiastic, inventive, committed and productive. In terms of the goal of for embedding quality principles into Australian university TNE practice, the case study testifies to the value of facilitating academics to transform their practices according to their quality needs.