CASE STUDY 5: A MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA) PROGRAMME DELIVERED IN SRI LANKA BY AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH A LOCAL INSTITUTION

Context
This case study reports on a MBA programme that is currently being delivered in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The MBA is delivered through an affiliation between an Australian university and a Sri Lankan university. The MBA takes 2 years to complete and is offered on a part-time basis. The creation of the MBA has been modelled on a postgraduate degree offered by the Australian university. The current cost of the degree is more than 400,000 Sri Lankan Rupees ($3000+ Australian dollars) where each university receives 50% of this amount. The students pay fees in three installments over the two years in their local currency (Sri Lankan Rupees). The Sri Lankan University then transfers the fees to the Australian University. Thus, the exchange rate prevalent at the time of transfer impacts on the amount transferred to the Australian University. As the Australian Dollar has been rising since of late, there has been a direct impact on the income for the Australian University from the MBA programme. Also it is important to note that while there is equal share of the teaching and course costs, the Sri Lankan university awards the Degree which is co-badged with the Australian institution’s logo.

Since its inception in 2010 the student cohort has diversified to include learners from various geographical regions in Sri Lanka. In 2011 for the second MBA group 62 students enrolled. What is evident from the 2010 to 2011 student enrolments is a shift in student demographics. For example in 2010 students tended to come from local areas within the district of Colombo. However in more recent times students from more regional areas are enrolling in the MBA. This has led to a shift in the programme’s delivery with more emphasis now being placed on ‘blended modes’ of delivery. Other shifts in delivery have involved the use of Skype, video conferencing, webinars and online self-study (Moodle) for the delivery of particular Australian units of study. This will be explored further in the case. It is important to note that the introduction of these flexible modes of delivery has enabled students to be able to study, maintain employment and meet the day to day demands of their everyday lives. In particular time demands for mothers enrolled in the programme has meant that a blended mode of delivery allows them balance the demands between academic requirements and personal commitments.

A Bachelor’s Degree is the pre-requisite for both onshore and offshore students to enrol in the Masters Programme. In addition there are enrolment options through ‘Advanced Standing’ based on other professional qualifications and experience deemed acceptable by both the Australian and Sri Lankan universities in keeping with the academic policies of both institutions. Such policies are committed to ensuring that the principles of transnational education are adhered to.

The MBA is marketed jointly by both institutions through a variety of marketing tools including paper and digital advertisements, television and radio promotions in Sri Lanka, web announcements and through Facebook. Costs for marketing are shared as are costs for all other expenses to do with the programme.

Both onshore and offshore academics were involved in developing this case study. For the academics based in Australia three face to face sessions were conducted which provided the data that follows. For the academics in Colombo one Skype session and three video
conferencing sessions were held. In one of the video conferencing sessions the 2011 cohort of MBA students participated in a focus group session to discuss the student experience in this transnational MBA programme.

**Part 1: Curriculum Development**

After the completion of the civil war the government of Sri Lanka set up a five point development agenda. This agenda involved converting Sri Lanka into a regional education hub and logistics hub. With this development the academic programme manager based in Australia took the initiative of proposing the introduction of the MBA in Sri Lanka through a collaborative arrangement between the Australian and Sri Lankan Universities. What followed was a series of discussions in which both institutions assessed the viability of the proposed MBA. All key stakeholders agreed that the introduction of such a programme would cater for the educational and industry demands of Sri Lanka. Another aspect discussed was the long term possibility of extending the MBA into the South Asian region covering India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal. As of May 2012 initial discussions around this theme has been concluded and have resulted in the development of a concept paper that aims to attract external funding.

Following on from the initial decision to launch the MBA both institutions agreed on the composition of the curriculum with specific units to be taught by each institution. The MBA is comprised of a total of 18 units of study, where each university teaches 50% of the units. The Australian team are responsible for teaching specialized units across areas such as international trade and policy, taxation policy, international customs law and WTO law. Other units of study such as classification of goods, valuation of goods and custom management theory and practice are also included here. In comparison, the Sri Lankan institution teaches generic management subjects such as Human Resources, Finance, Accounts, organisational behaviour and development as well as management skills. The teaching and learning content of units of study that make up the MBA in Sri Lanka has been tailored to specifically cater for the cultural, social, economic and industry settings. Overall curriculum material including course guide, readings, case studies, online research activities encompass culturally relevant material in order to ensure that the students and staff can relate well to the teaching content.

**Delivery**

The delivery of the MBA is done through 8 academic terms in which generally each academic institution teaches one unit per term. The Australian institution uses a multitude of modes including face to face, online, Skype interventions, webinars and video conferencing to deliver course material over each academic term that runs for 10 weeks. There is co-teaching for the units offered by the Australian institution. This co-teaching is done by an Australian lecturer and a Sri Lankan lecturer with guidance and supervision from the Australian programme manager. Prior to the commencement of each academic term an orientation is done between the Sri Lanka lecturer and the Australian lecturer to plan the teaching content, assessment activities and learning support. The programme manager oversees this orientation in order to ensure that a quality assurance element is in place and that there is equivalence between units of study that are taught in different geographical locations. In this orientation it is also the responsibility of the Australian lecturer to comply with the study guide of the unit. Prior to the commencement of the Action plan only one unit had a complete set of teaching resources. Section two discusses the impact of applying the principle ‘curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evidence clear quality controls’.
aim of the orientation process is to familiarize the Australian lecturer with the cultural sensitivities of Sri Lanka. Food, landscape climate, political environment are also addressed so as to assure that the Australian lecturers feel comfortable and confident during their teaching period.

In the case of face to face delivery an Australian academic travels to Colombo and conducts sessions over a weekend and/or two weekdays covering 15-20 hours teaching. This is generally done at the commencement of the academic term. During these sessions the Sri Lankan lecturer is present and he takes over the teaching activities for the remainder of the academic term. The majority of these tutors have completed the MBA or a Masters with similar units so are familiar with the course content and programme aims. Upon return the Australian lecturer also conducts between 3-4 hour long sessions using other blended modes of delivery outlined above. This approach is adapted to further supplement the teaching activities of the Sri Lankan lecturer. Both Sri Lankan and Australian lecturers maintain regular communication via email and Skype regarding teaching and learning activities.

The introduction of digital pedagogies into the course in 2011 has meant enormous cost savings for the Australian institution. The Australian course co-ordinator commented that it costs around $10,000 Australian dollars to send an Australian academic to Sri Lanka for an intensive teaching period. These costs include flights, per diem, lecture fees, food and accommodation. The need to have an intensive session with each unit has been reduced with the introduction of video conferencing and through adopting ‘webinars’. It is worth noting that while the Australian programme manager is pleased with cost savings he asserted the need to ensure that foreign students are able to physically meet with Australian lecturers. We see this in his comment below;

‘Transnational teaching should not take away face-to-face involvement of the mother university. Over a period of 24 months there should be at least a minimum of 4 interventions. Students need to have the feeling that they are collaborating with a foreign university so our physical presence is critical’.

Overall such amendments have meant a 75% reduction for the Australian university involved.

In the sixth academic term MBA students are offered the option of joining a study tour to Australia to enhance their learning experience. No credit is granted for participating in the study tour. The cost of the tour is around 220 000 rupees per student. During the study tour students meet with the faculty and visit a range of industry establishments. In addition they also visit the tourist attractions in the city of Canberra and some choose to visit other Australian states as well. Approximately 80% of students who join this study tour are sponsored by their employers. There were 32 out of 62 students from the MBA 2010 group who joined the tour in January 2012, including two families. The study tour also provided opportunities for exposing postgraduate students to pathway options for further postgraduate study in Australia. Some students have expressed an interest in enrolling in a PhD at the Australian University. This has led to discussions between the two institutions for further collaboration at the PhD level.

The study tour includes three days of in-class sessions that are facilitated by the MBA programme manager. These sessions commence with a formal welcome given by the Vice
Chancellor and provide students with an opportunity to meet senior academic and non-academic staff. The High Commissioner of Sri Lanka is also invited to attend which reaffirms the value that this Australian University places on maintaining strong international relations. The importance of the study tour is that;

It is an excellent opportunity for the Sri Lankan students and the Australian University staff to physically see each other and put a face to the name. This study tour also provides students with a chance to familiarise themselves with the Australian culture and gain a better understanding of the Australian way of life. Each opening session that we have conducted included a welcome Indigenous fire ceremony performed by two Indigenous elders. This connects well with the Sri Lankan culture because Sri Lanka too has its own Indigenous people the “Veddahs” (Australian Programme manager).

Ensuring/safeguarding quality of the programme

All teaching staff both Sri Lanka based and Australia based have Masters level and above qualifications. In most cases the lecturers are the alumni of either the Australian or Sri Lankan institution. Additionally the academics have practical industry experience having worked in some capacity in international trade, border management and logistics. The industry experience provides students with up to date practical knowledge that directly relates to concepts embedded into the curriculum.

At the inception, the curriculum package included a unit outline (UO), study guide, (SG), book of readings (BoR), power point presentations and Additional readings if any. During the delivery of a particular unit both Sri Lankan and Australian academics including the programme manager also scope existing literature that can be used as examples in the teaching materials. Newsworthy articles and events as well as current affairs are also used to enrich the teaching content. However, after the commencement of the ALTC project and with application of principles identified in the project, the curriculum package has been further enhanced to include a lecturer’s manual/guide, assignment questions and potential answers.

Assessment for each of the units also includes culturally relevant tasks to ensure that learning adds value to their current professional contexts. Assessment in each unit of study compromises of both formative and summative assessments: The summative component is 60% of the total grade and is made up of take home assignments, online discussions, online quizzes and classroom presentations. The formative assessment is 40% of the total grade and is made up of an ‘Open Book’ examination at the end of each academic term. One of the Australian lecturers made note of the fact that

In the Sri Lankan education system and probably across Asia, assessment is generally based on repeating the concepts that are learnt. But in this programme, assessments are based on the application of knowledge learnt rather than repetition. Initially during the course it was evident that students were not used to this type of assessment but as the course progressed they realized the benefits of assessing their knowledge in a range of ways.

It is important to note that all assessments are set by the Australian tutors but Sri Lankan lecturers have the opportunity to tailor these assessments to suit the cultural setting.
The moderation process currently followed by both universities mirrors the policy used by the Australian institution on moderation. At the end of each academic term borderline cases and failures are subject to moderation by the Australian team. All assignments are submitted by students electronically on Moodle. Students must also submit their assignment through ‘Submit’. This ensures that they have adhered to academic integrity in the completion of their work. Part two of the case examines further development of moderation processes to include the principles ‘Curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evidence clear quality controls’ and ‘Directors of academic programmes in Australian universities should be members of offshore advisory academic councils to ensure quality auditing of curriculum pedagogy and assessment’.

**Quality assurance systems in place for transnational programmes**
The World Customs Organisation (WCO) has accredited the onshore course offered by the Australian University on which the MBA has been designed. The accreditation process for the offshore MBA has been modeled on the same WCO process.

The Sri Lankan University has its own code of practice aligned which it applies for its local programmes. Similarly, the Australian University has its academic policies which it applies for is local programmes. Since both institutions do not have a specific code of practice or policy on transnational programmes, initially they agreed to apply their local policies in the MBA programme. This has led to a combined policy document that has been embedded in the MOU and contractual agreement entered into between the two institutions. However, the Australian University now has a draft transnational education policy which examines the following areas:

- Alignment of the processes with the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF)
- Assurance of the academic policies of the Australian University are not breached
- Ensuring that the Australian University education committee approves the transnational policies
- Ensuring that the transnational education programmes complies with the strategy plan of the Australian University

The Australian institution intends to submit a proposal to the Sri Lankan institution requesting that a combined transnational policy proposal be created. The Australian programme manager asserts the benefit of this, ‘the two institutions have already offered this programme twice in which nearly one hundred and twenty students have gone through for the last three years. Therefore both institutions have learnt and enormous amount about the elements that make up a sound comprehensive transnational policy document. The construction of this document will also provide a solid framework and clarity around the rules of engagement between the two academic institutions engaged in transnational education’.

**Part 2: Mapping Principles onto Practice**
There were a number of key challenges identified in the focus groups sessions, video conferences and Skype sessions that needed to be considered for implementation in the Action Learning Project. Accordingly, it was decided that selected principles from the pedagogy and curriculum areas would be trialed to examine the following teaching and learning goals. Both Australian and Sri Lanka lecturers agreed that the following principles would be considered for implementation with the MBA 2011 group:
**Challenge One:** To have a unified process for the construction of curriculum packages that will assist both onshore and offshore lecturers

**Principles:**

**Curriculum:**
- There should be clear guidelines for curriculum implementation, curriculum adaptation and curriculum renewal.
- Cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation of course material, its delivery and the assessment of students’ work.
- 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.
- Curriculum packages should be comprehensive and should evince clear quality controls.
- Offshore staff should have autonomy in adapting the curriculum to suit the local content 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.

**Pedagogy:**
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally-determined teaching/learning practices.
- Attention should be given to the possibility of ensuring that offshore programmes are delivered through a blended medium, implemented by a small and consistent team of academics from Australia, combined with local tutors who are trained by the host university.
- Provision should be made to ensure programme delivery is underpinned by strong teaching relationships between staff in Australia and those based permanently offshore.

**Challenge Two:** Internal and external audit of all curriculum packages;

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

**Pedagogy**
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally-determined teaching/learning practices.
- In respect to the assessment of student work, feedback and moderation processes should be monitored for effectiveness.
• The delivery of the curriculum should be implemented according to the specification documents approved by all partners, so as to avoid student dissatisfaction and lack of respect for the Australian institution

**Challenge Three:** To develop a transnational policy that clearly identifies ‘RPL’ and ‘Credit Transfer’ Processes

**Principles**

**Curriculum:**
• Regulations relating to advanced standing, transfer of credit, student failure and withdrawal from off-shore programmes should be made clear to offshore students at the outset rather than at the point of crisis.
• Programme entry requirements should be the same for all students, whether located onshore or offshore.

**Pedagogy**
• Coordinators of programmes should consider establishing a Joint Academic Board (consisting of Australian and offshore executives, teaching staff from the host university, tutors and student representatives from the offshore country) to ensure the existence of quality audits, transparent communication and a strong ongoing relationship between organizations

**Challenge Four:** To further develop teaching and learning approaches that are multi-modal and technologically enhanced

**Principles**

**Pedagogy**
• Attention should be given to the possibility of ensuring that offshore programmes are delivered through a blended medium, implemented by a small and consistent team of academics from Australia, combined with local tutors who are trained by the host university
• Continual use of web-based learning, including for the provision of resources for learning, could enhance ongoing connections between academic staff and students

**Challenge Five:** To establish an Academic Board that maintains quality assurance processes in the programme

**Principles**

**Curriculum**
• Coordinators of programmes should consider establishing a Joint Academic Board (consisting of Australian and offshore executives, teaching staff from the host university, tutors and student representatives from the offshore country) to ensure the existence of quality audits, transparent communication and a strong ongoing relationship between organisations.
• Regulations relating to advanced standing, transfer of credit, student failure and withdrawal from off-shore programmes should be made clear to offshore students at the outset rather than at the point of crisis.

Pedagogy

• Programme design and programme evaluations should be responsive to the views of both onshore and offshore academic stakeholders.

• Provision should be made to ensure programme delivery is underpinned by strong teaching relationships between staff in Australia and those based permanently offshore.

• Personnel involved in the administration, delivery and assessment of the programme in both countries should be treated equally if the programme is to be respected in the offshore context.

Part 3: the Action Learning Project

The action learning project team collected data to document the impact of particular transnational principles on teaching and learning practice. These data collection tools included questionnaires, surveys, meetings, interviews and focus group sessions. The section that follows highlights the results from the data collected.

During the initial focus group session the Action Research identified the following goals that it would set out to achieve in order to deal with the challenges below.

**Action learning activity: comprehensive curriculum packages**

Prior to the commencement of the ALTC project only two units of study were accompanied with a comprehensive curriculum package. 3 Australian lecturers (including the programme manager) and 2 Sri Lankan lecturers were involved in the collation of comprehensive curriculum packages for each of the units in the MBA.

A direct outcome is that each unit of study contains

- Unit Outline (UO)
- Study Guide
- Book of Readings (BoR)
- Power point presentations
- Additional Readings if any
- Lecturer’s manual/guide
- Assignments – questions and potential answers
- Study Guide
- Lesson plans as a basis for their delivery

Sri Lankan lecturers were invited to critique each of the unit packages to ensure that cultural knowledge of customs evaluation and procedures was included in the course material. Survey results of Sri Lanka based lecturers indicated that 53.3 % (Strongly agreed) and 47.7 % (agreed) that the comprehensive study material allowed them to be more organized for their teaching sessions. In addition 75% (Strongly agreed) and 25%(agreed) that they had received guidance and support from the Australian team around their role as a lecturer in the programme. The implementation of a more systematic approach to managing course work in each of the units is also outlined below:
‘Having a comprehensive package for all the units has two benefits. This first is that it enhances the confidence of both the students and lecturers involved in the content material and it enhances the marketability of the programme because the MBA is now better organized and structured. I think that this activity has taken the level of professionalism of both institutions to a higher level in their approach to transnational education.

Overall this action learning activity has meant that Sri Lankan and Australian lecturers felt more confident with their role in the programme.

**Action learning activity: the creation of a transnational committee**
During the focus group session there was a discussion of the need to establish a transnational education committee to oversee the quality of the programme. This committee has now been set up and is made up of the Australian programme manager, the Sri Lankan programme co-ordinator, two Australian lecturers, 2 Sri Lankan lecturers and a student representative. The initial meeting is scheduled for June and the team believes that it is essential that this committee functions effectively to ensure that the quality of the programme sustained. The team also believes that through the creation of this committee there is an opportunity to be more strategic about professional development for all staff members. Another function of the committee is to make sure that moderation of assignments and teaching and learning materials are consistent with the transnational policy that is being drafted.

**Action learning activity: multi-modal delivery**
The need to incorporate more online resources was also another goal for the Australian programme manager and his Australian colleagues. This resulted in the creation of thirty minute webinar sessions for students enrolled in the MBA in Sri Lanka. Students valued this mode of delivery. This is evident in survey results which indicated that 47.2% (strongly agreed) and 52.8% (agreed) that the blended mode of delivery using online, webinar and skype sessions, as well as face to face intensive teaching helped them to learn. The use of ‘Moodle’ was also seen as a useful teaching tool for students who felt that it gave them more flexibility with their studies. A comment made to the programme manager by one student was ‘the webinar gives me the opportunity to take part in a learning activity from wherever I am at a time convenient for me’. Another student joked with the programme manager stating that ‘I will be in transit during the webinar and maybe I can join in from the transit lounge during my trip’. What these comments emphasize is that the blended mode of delivery allows them a lot of flexibility to engage in the learning process within their busy lives.

**Action plan learning activity: transparent processes for advanced standing and credit transfer**
The Australian programme manager has initiated a process with the Sri Lankan institution to establish a transparent process to cover credit transfer and advance standing. The aim is to ensure that the academic integrity of the programme is maintained and that students are informed in advance of the process. Prior to the Action Plan, there was no process for students or staff in seeking RPL or Credit Transfer. Creating a transparent process for RPL will benefit both staff and students involved in the programme. For students the RPL process provides them with recognition of prior learning and for staff this process will give them a clear decision making process.
**Action learning activity: cultural sensitivity in teaching and learning resources**

Ensuring that units of study were designed with practical assessment tasks that can address needs of Sri Lanka as well as the South Asian region is being considered by the Australian team. Though the content has incorporated this aspect into account, it is felt that more can be done. As mentioned earlier, “application of knowledge” has to be given prominence in the learning outcomes of the programme. As repetition of theory is at the core of the current education system in Sri Lanka, application is not seen as an essential element in the learning outcome. Thus, the MBA course has to be tailored more to address this issue.

Stemming from this “repetition of knowledge” syndrome, students have the tendency to use theoretical knowledge in answering their assignments. As they have been doing this freely in their secondary education and being encouraged to do so by the system, they give repetition prominence even at the MBA level. The Australian lecturers view this as an element of plagiarism and there have been a few instances where students had to be reminded to quote references.

The Australian programme manager is planning to deal with this issue during first academic term of the next intake of the MBA. For the current 2011 MBA group, he plans to conduct a few presentations to explain this point.

Overall the application of the quality principles has enabled greater clarity around cultural issues tied to teaching and learning practices which has led to the strengthening of the course.Ensuring that students are clear on academic expectations is also another benefit to emerge from this action learning activity.