CASE STUDY 7: A MASTER OF NURSING PROGRAMME DELIVERED IN HONG KONG BY AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Introduction
This case concerns the application of the quality principles within an off shore context in Hong Kong. The programme is delivered in both Australia and Hong Kong and is considered equivalent. The programme delivered in Hong Kong is designed in the Australian institution and delivered by Australian academics on shore but is taught solely by local academics off shore. It is however quality assured through a joint management committee consisting of academic and professional staff from both Australia and Hong Kong. Within the programme, the Australian academic staff member who delivers the course onshore administers each course when local lecturers deliver it offshore. There is a strong commitment to equivalence by both partners and this is achieved in a number of ways as outlined below.

1. Sharing stakeholder experiences and perspectives on transnational delivery

1.1 What is the situation/ context of delivery
Students enter this course through the recommendations of the offshore institution, and the recommended applications are confirmed or challenged by the programme leader in Australia. Initially, the administrative team in Hong Kong carefully scrutinises applications based on the entry criteria set by the Australian institution, ensures that the application is complete and, those that meet the criteria are forwarded to Australia for validation. There is very little disagreement between the two parties as the selection criteria is very specific.

The two institutions have had an ongoing relationship for over twenty years and the fruits of these partnerships are evident in the current relationship that is open, collegial and trusting. It is evident that both teams have enormous respect for one another and value the differing but complementary roles in implementing the programme. This has a very positive impact of the design, delivery and administration of the programme. This strong relationship has enabled a number of quality principles to be realised and the teams are able to celebrate a long-standing programme with continuing growth in numbers and the achievement of ongoing respect from the nursing community in Hong Kong.

Overview of the Australian Institution
This university in Australia is a major urban university spread over several campuses in a large metropolitan capital city of Australia. The university is set in a context of diverse cultures, high unemployment, reflecting the urban sprawl that characterises this large city. The Council and myriad of government authorities in this city conceptualise the community that surrounds this university as highly challenging and requiring high levels of support for families, unemployed youth, health and transport.

The marketing materials that foreground the strengths of the university suggest that the outlying campuses share many of the characteristics of the region, in that there
are very close relationships with local communities and businesses. The university policies celebrate their commitment to equity and participation and reflect a very strong obligation to access, diversity and social inclusion of a differentiated range of learners who may be culturally, socially and academically disadvantaged. The support services within the university affirm this commitment and also demonstrate respect towards quality assuring successful learning outcomes for traditionally marginalised students. A plethora of scholarships are available to support economically and educationally disadvantaged students in order to facilitate programme completion.

The vision statement of the university declares the university to be enterprising and forward-looking and committed to access and equity in higher education. The University is culturally diverse, with over 2500 staff and about 40 000 students drawn from Australia and around the world. Whilst set in a very historical landscape the university proposes a futures-oriented strategic plan designed for the knowledge economy of the 21st century where economic growth and social outcomes will depend on the skills of individuals and communities, and where education will be flexible and continually adapt to meet individual needs.

Across all faculties within this university there is a focus on knowledge construction through the use of critical thinking and enquiry based learning with a view to preparing graduates for employment in the future in professions that are central to their community bit also responsive to future growth and development.

At the centre of curriculum design is student learning in a university that is research active but not research intensive. The graduate destinations data, and the take up of graduates in employment, together with excellence in teaching are two key priorities of this university. There is plentiful opportunity for students to engage in extra curricula activities, participate fully in campus life and liaise with academic and professional staff.

The university boasts strong partnerships with the community and industry with a view to preparing graduates to be work-ready on graduation and to demonstrate the capacities that reflect real world needs and best practice.

**Overview of the off shore institution**

The off shore University set in the Asian region has over 50 years of experience in providing broad-based educational programmes. This institution has gained recognition for high quality education in both the sciences and humanities. The University values academic success as well as service to the community based on its faith-based status. As such, the institution is committed to providing ‘whole person’ education that incorporates intellectual, cultural, social and sporting skills.

This university offers undergraduate (including associate degrees) and postgraduate programmes, mostly taught by local staff. However the university does engage a number of providers from overseas particularly in relation to postgraduate and higher degree programmes. This institution claims that all programmes are tailored to prepare students for the challenges of a globalised knowledge-based economy.

**The programme**

Based on the university website, the aim of the Master of Nursing is to provide
registered nurses with the theoretical knowledge and critical thinking skills to prepare them for advanced practice in the clinical setting. The programme is designed so that graduates will be able to synthesise and apply advanced nursing concepts in order to lead nursing practice in the region and optimise health outcomes for the growing community.

The way the programme is designed enables students to choose a specialisation in either Clinical Teaching or Research. Graduates of this course can pursue careers as a nurse, both enrolled and registered, as well as in the field of nurse management.

The Master of Nursing (Clinical Leadership) aims to provide opportunities for clinical nursing and midwifery leaders (expert clinicians, nursing and midwifery managers and leaders at all levels of health care) to develop their leadership capacity in a manner that enables them to implement transformative change while maintaining nursing excellence within the clinical practice environment.

The course is offered by the Australian partner’s School of Nursing and Midwifery. The University claims that this team of academics leads nurse education in Australia and has a strong profile in research and scholarship in Australia. This university also boasts well-established ties across the country and in the Asian region with collaborative partnerships and active international links, enabling the university to work with a range of partners to advance nursing education and research.

The programme structure has four core units, two major areas of study and a range of electives. Students of the Master of Nursing (Clinical Leadership) may exit with a Graduate Diploma in Nursing (Clinical Leadership) following successful completion of the four mandatory core units and two elective units. The Master of Nursing (Clinical Leadership) provides opportunities for clinical nursing and midwifery leaders (expert clinicians, nursing and midwifery managers and leaders at all levels of health care) to enable them to implement change while maintaining nursing excellence within the clinical practice environment.

To gain admission to the programme in Australia, students are required to be registered as a nurse or midwife and hold a Bachelor of Nursing or Bachelor of Health Science (Nursing). Alternative entry requires 5 years full-time equivalent recent professional work experience in nursing or health care.

Commonly, to gain admission into nursing programmes offshore, students must hold a higher degree or Associate Diploma in Nursing for entry into a top-up bachelor’s course. However for entry into this programme a Bachelor of Nursing that has been taught in English is required. The major driving force of the success of this programme is the high need to upgrade the nursing profession in the country in which it is offered and the capacity of successful completion to guarantee career advancement.

The curriculum consists of a suite of courses including the following core courses:

Leadership in Clinical Practice
Leadership and the Development of organisational capacity
Policy Power and politics in Health Care provision
Leadership for quality and safety in health care
This suite of core courses is complemented by a set of electives that is broadening in purpose and constitution. Both the offshore Higher Education Bureau and the Australian Nursing Authority accredit the programme. The curriculum is reviewed every five years according to the university accreditation policy. Two internal university advisory boards have been established to manage the programme, one in each of the offshore and on shore contexts. There are some common memberships of both which enables strong communication across the contexts.
The programme is delivered in three modes, face-to-face, online and in blended delivery.

1.2 How does cultural context impact on teaching and learning off shore?
The programme has evolved over 20 or more years when the Australian partner first offered professional upgrade modules through the offshore partner to the profession of nursing. The traditional training of nurses in the off shore country was hospital based many years ago. With a change of policy in the field many registered nurses need to upgrade their qualifications, particularly if they wanted to pursue career advancement. Initially, within the university but from another campus, staff flew in from Australia to provide upgrading courses in the field of primary health care. These were small classes of 30 to 40 conducted in the rooms of the off shore campus. The next iteration of the programme, in line with regulatory expectations within the profession in the off shore site, focused on transitioning nurses from Diploma status to Bachelor status. The market for this programme was extensive and it was enacted over a number of years, until the point of time when client demand became limited – “the conversion market simply dried up.” The interest of the Australian partner in the off shore nursing context was reconstituted in 2007 when a Masters of Clinical Nursing was offered. As stated above the aim of the Master of Nursing is to provide registered nurses with the theoretical knowledge and critical thinking skills to prepare them for advanced practice in the clinical setting. The programme is designed so that graduates will be able to synthesise and apply advanced nursing concepts in order to lead nursing practice and optimise health outcomes. This has been a very successful programme for a number of reasons, one of them being the deep understanding that the Australian staff have of the nursing profession in the off shore context, together with the capacities of the Australian staff to align the design and delivery of the programme in a multicultural context that is unique to this setting. The longstanding relationship amongst key academics from the off shore country and Australia is central to responding to the cultural context in which the course is delivered. Over the years the Australian programme leader in particular has developed a deep understanding of the nursing profession in HK, its pre-requisite knowledge and capacities and the cultural contexts of learning, teaching and field based nursing practice in Hong Kong. With this deep understanding and sustained experience with teaching nurse education in Hong Kong the Australian programme leader is able to provide a programme that meets the cultural idiosyncrasies of the clientele and at the same time offer a curriculum of integrity.

The culture of the nursing profession in Hong Kong can be characterised in similar ways to the culture of the nursing profession in Australia. The knowledge requirements and the capacities for nursing are not the same but are similar and can
be accommodated quite easily at the level of delivery. The local lecturers who team with the Australian academics in designing the programme continually advise the onshore partners where modifications are required in relation to field based practices, but not theoretical knowledge. The Australian staff readily accommodates these recommendations at the level of design and review. However in the domain of learning engagement, issues are more problematic and there have been ongoing discussions about how to best cater for the needs of professional working nurses who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and have a variety of educational backgrounds. The issues relate mainly to assessment particularly in relation to higher-level thinking and critique and with the challenges of written English. Thus it is deemed important to offer students a variety of assessment tasks that are responsive to different ways of thinking cognitively and culturally and, to ensure that students are provided with support in order to address any gaps in learning. This is achieved through ongoing collaboration and discussion across the teams in Australia and Hong Kong.

1.3 How do academic stakeholders ensure/safeguard quality of the programme

The programme is designed in Australia by an experienced team of academics who are very familiar with the off shore context. All of the programme designers have been practicing nurses in Australia. They are very familiar with the registration requirements of Nursing Boards in the off shore context and the Australian setting. The programme is monitored by the university academic board in Australia and a quality management committee in both the onshore and the off shore context. There is a commitment from the Australian team to provide a programme that meets the requirements of both regulatory authorities and also accommodates the needs of the clientele in both contexts. We are totally committed to providing programmes that students want and need without compromising the content or the assessment. While this is time-consuming at the level of design and implementation, we think this is the basis of our success and our quality outcomes. It takes a lot of talking and exchange of ideas to achieve this status.

All of the materials that are developed for online delivery in the Australian context are offered to the students in the face-to-face delivery in the off shore context. This is seen to be the core of the quality issue of equivalence, that all students have access to the same materials despite the differing contexts.

In a similar manner the design of the assessment tasks reflects the importance of equivalence. The tasks are designed in the first instance by Australian staff. The tasks are implemented in both contexts by lecturers and assessed according to a set of criteria. A random selection of papers is cross-marked and a serious process of moderation of assessments marks takes place on a regular basis. Any papers that are graded as unsatisfactory in the offshore context are cross marked by the Australian coordinator of a specific course. In order to cater for the diversity of learning approaches that characterises both cohorts, it is deemed desirable that a variety of assessment tasks is included in the programme including case studies, essays, literature reviews, and some choice of topics for investigation that are locally important.

1.4 What quality assurance systems are in place for transnational programmes?

Local lecturers
In order to cater for implementation of the programme, local lecturers complete all
teaching in the offshore context. These lecturers are commonly practicing in the
field, usually in senior positions, and have usually completed the programme
offered by the university at an earlier stage. The local lecturers are typically well
known to the staff of the Australian university and well respected. It is deemed
appropriate that teaching is completed by local lecturers as they are most familiar
with nursing and leadership practices in the off shore context. It was argued that
while the theory that underpins nursing degrees is generally global in nature, the
implementation of that theory is contextually specific and thus it is important in
this transnational context that the programme is delivered by local lecturers of high
standing in the off shore nursing community. This use of local, but well educated
and respected practicing nurses enhances the quality of the delivery.

Induction of staff
In order to ensure that the programme is delivered in according with the
curriculum design and the academic rules and regulations of the university, the
Australian programme leader or her representative, is responsible for the induction
of the local lecturers. This is completed during a time when the Australian lecturer
is off shore for promotion and marketing or orientation activities. An Induction
Booklet and an Assessment Guide to ensure the equivalence of the programme
from all aspects, delivery, teaching and assessment supports the induction process.
Local lecturers are also taught how to use the online facilities and the importance
of communication is emphasised. This process is deemed important for reasons of
equity and equivalence.

Academic Management Committee
An academic management committee modeled on the Australian internal
infrastructure has been established to monitor the quality of the programme and to
deal with emerging issues on a regular basis. The management committee consists
of programme leaders, course coordinators, the administration staff and lecturers
from both the off shore and onshore team. They communicate through face-to-face
meetings where possible, Skype conversations and email on a regular basis. The
processes of management and administration model the onshore university
procedures and policies and are designed to foster, quality implementation of the
programme, networking opportunities, good will and updating of ongoing
contextual changes relating to marketing, the profession or policy changes in the
offshore context.

1.5 Do existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning?
Use of same coordinator
The Australian team emphasised the importance of equivalence at every level. It
was stressed that it was absolutely essential for the Australian course coordinator
to be the coordinator of the course in the offshore context despite the fact that she
was not delivering the course offshore. These coordinators deliver the course on
shore and are very familiar with the content and assessment. They liaise with the
off shore lecturer who is delivering the course to ensure consistency of content,
resources, strategies and assessment. The major differentiation is that the offshore
programme is delivered face-to-face while the onshore programme is delivered
100 percent on line. This can be the cause of some problems but open and regular
communication, together with induction of local lecturers keeps these problems to
a minimum. Course outlines, learning guides, readings, and content are all managed through the course coordinator to ensure the equivalence and consistency is achieved. The management is greatly facilitated by the off shore administration team who liaise daily with the course coordinator and deal with emerging problems related to teaching and learning.

**Regular feedback**
In order to monitor the quality of the delivered course, evaluations are conducted at the close of the semester. The university course evaluation tool is utilised and a sample of assessment tasks is randomly chosen for checking. Modifications are made to the programme based on this feedback.

**Open and transparent communication**
The administration team of two staff in the offshore context communicates daily with the programme leader and course coordinators. One staff member has been a part of the team for a very long period and is invaluable in terms of her historical knowledge of people, processes and resources. She has a strong commitment to facilitating cross-cultural communication with strengthens the operationalisation of the programme. The off shore coordinator is seen to be the bridge between the onshore and off shore teams. This system generates quick and efficient responses to any problems that arise and the administrative approach is characterised by successful troubleshooting and a positive approach to problem solving.

2. **Mapping principles to practice in teaching and learning**
There were a number of key principles that characterised this approach to transnational teaching. These were identified by the team as principles that had shaped their work in the past and continue to do so.

**Principle 1**
*Cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation of course material, its delivery and the assessment of students’ work.*
The programme leaders have been involved in teaching of shore with this partner for 25 years. They have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural qualities of the students who enroll in the programme and the implications of applying nursing theory in the cultural contexts of the profession in this off shore context. Further readings that pertain to the local context are central to the resources provided. The use of local staff in delivering this programme is a key factor in being able to adequately respond to cultural diversity.

**Principle 2**
*Curriculum design and delivery should be responsive to local offshore policies, practices and procedures to enhance student engagement.*
In delivering the programme, the teaching staff is fully aware of local off shore policy in the university through communication with the administrative team. This is also achieved through the orientation and induction programmes. Further, the staff who are employed to teach in the programme are high standing people in the offshore hospital system. Thus they are very familiar with local nursing practices and procedures. Many of the lecturers are graduates of the programme and understanding how to effectively engage local students in learning, based on their
own experiences. Some are also undergoing the upgrading of their qualifications through attending a university teaching course.

**Principle 3**

*In order for the Australian university to maintain its credibility it should ensure that offshore programmes for a particular degree should have the same entry requirements as apply to those students who wish to enrol in the same degree programme onshore.*

The onshore university carefully audits entry into this programme. All applications are firstly vetted by the off shore team and then forwarded onto the Australian university for analysis, validation and approval. This ensures equity and equivalence on entry into the course across offshore and onshore contexts.

**Principle 4**

*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.*

It is evident that due to the course coordinator managing the course across both contexts that there is scope for consistency and responsiveness as the students engage with the theory across two differing professional contexts. There was a confidence across all parties that due to appointment of only one coordinator, the delivery of the course was responsive to local cultural differences without jeopardising the integrity of the course design. As the course was accredited by regulatory authorities in both countries, this was deemed to be very important.

**Principle 5**

*Assessment in offshore programmes should be moderated and controlled by Australian university academics. Grade distribution should be a key responsibility of the Australian university so as to ensure, moderation, equity and parity of esteem.*

This principle was clearly evident in all modes of delivery. There was a very strong commitment to this principle by both parties in the interests of ensuring the quality of graduates in offshore contexts.

**Principle 6**

*Communication protocols should be established in advance of programme delivery.*

This principle was a core principle in underpinning the ongoing success of this programme. The sustained relationship between the programme leader and one of the administrators facilitated this process. Nevertheless it was high on all agendas, particularly the lecturers to ensure open, transparent and ongoing communication at all times. It was the view of the off shore administrative team that communication should take place daily so that problems or issues were resolved quickly. It was evident that there was enormous respect between the parties due to good communication.

**Principle 7**

*Universities should have formal processes whereby:*
1. the quality of offshore programmes can be regularly reviewed and concerns resolved in a transparent manner; and
2. coordinators of programmes should have the right to veto the appointment of locally engaged staff

The appointment of management committees in both contexts facilitates the achievement of this principle. It was noted that this model was so successful that other faculties in the university are shaping their programmes around this approach. The current model has been arrived at after pursuing several different models over the past ten years or so. The current model ensures that the same information is disseminated to all stakeholders

**Principle 12**
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

This university has a formal preparation programme that ensures all staff are aware of local conditions. However due to the longstanding relationship between the two partners, any issues that arise are dealt with strategically but informally.

**Principle 13**
Staff appointed offshore should fulfill the expectations of the Australian university with regard to their academic qualifications, training and experience, as well as their general suitability for appointment, including English language competency

As stated earlier, most staff are graduates of earlier programmes. Many hold a Masters degree from the Australian university or from an English university. All have graduated from an English teaching university. Further all staff are held in high esteem within their profession and selected for teaching based on career achievements. While the local team identify possible staff for delivery of the programme, the Australian team completes appointment of staff.

**Principle 14**
Faculties/Departments should establish management committees to establish and monitor the effectiveness of offshore activities.

This has been described earlier. This is stated to be one of the key reasons for the long-term success of the programme.

**Principle 16**
The purpose of the committees should be to ensure that:

- appropriate staff are involved in all key aspects of course delivery and development;
- staff development and orientation programmes are relevant, up-to-date, useful and regularly reviewed;
- mentoring takes place between newly appointed and experienced staff;
- programmes are reviewed, at least annually, to determine their viability; and
- a ‘clearing house’ for issues raised by staff, both offshore and local
The Management committee successfully implements all of these requirements on a regular basis, both strategically and informally.

3. Development of action learning plans to implement and evaluate principles.

**Principle 1 for action: curriculum design and delivery should be responsive to local offshore policies, practices and procedures to enhance student engagement.**

While there is agreement that the course is designed for students by the Australian university, it was stated by both partners that the practical implementation of the theory underpinning courses needs modification to ensure that students in the offshore setting engage with the content and can take learning outcomes successfully into the field. It was deemed important to acknowledge that local lecturers know the local scene and are in the best position to apply the theoretical knowledge to the nursing profession in the offshore contexts. It was agreed that Australian content is often problematic “if forced upon local students”. Thus the Australian staff and the local lecturers worked tirelessly on a continuing basis to adapt the theory to local practice in this field. Further, as local issues emerge throughout the delivery of the course in the offshore setting, the knowledge base of many courses had to be “tweaked” to be responsive to local medical or nursing crises such as was evident in the SARS outbreak. As hospital policies in the offshore context undergo change, so too the programme requires adjustment. This principle of curriculum modification has been trialed for many years and proves to be a key to student satisfaction. The process is generated through local lecturers communicating with the offshore coordinator who liaises with the Australian coordinator, signaling a required change to the curriculum. This is the catalyst to a series of SKYPE discussions, teleconferences and email communications that lead to curriculum adjustments that reshape the curriculum delivery to be responsive to local contexts. All changes are reported to the university through the Faculty Academic Board and ratified as operational changes not conceptual changes to the programme. This process of curriculum responsivity is acknowledged as one of the key platforms for ongoing success of the programme.

**Principle 2 for action: 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**

Earlier problems related to miscommunications or differing forms of inconsistency at the level of curriculum implementation, have been addressed through a number of organisational structures. The key structure can be characterised as streamlined communication. Firstly the team is deliberately small in number. The same person coordinates each subject, no matter what the medium of delivery. Therefore students who engage with the course domestically, offshore or through blended delivery all receive advice from the one person. This has overcome miscommunication and enhances the sense of equity across all modes of delivery. Further all resources are made available to all students. All students and staff within the three modes of delivery receive the same email communications and the coordinator is in a position to respond quickly and in an instructive manner with a sense of confidence that there will be few if any misunderstandings. Team meetings with the course coordinator are regularly held so those offshore and
onshore lecturers have plentiful opportunities to meet and discuss issues within the course. The programme leader often takes part in these meetings in the interests of strong and consistent leadership. The off shore administration team has a strong relationship with all course coordinators in Australia, and should a minor issue arise, immediate contact is made, “emails are exchanged daily,” with a view to resolving the issue promptly and to the satisfaction of all. Students have given staff a clear indication that this focused team approach enhances the quality of learning in this programme. Students affirm that they are supported in times of crisis and confusion by clear communication from both local and Australian lecturers. This initiative to achieve streamlined communication has brought coherence, consistency, equity and high levels of student satisfaction to the programme.

**Principle 3 for action: Assessment in offshore programmes should be moderated and controlled by Australian university academics. Grade distribution should be a key responsibility of the Australian university so as to ensure, moderation, equity and parity of esteem**

One of the critical issues expressed by the offshore staff related to assessment. Key assessment tasks are central to curriculum development and design from an onshore perspective, taking into consideration the global contexts of this discipline. However feedback from local offshore lecturers revealed that the designated assessment tasks often required “adjustments to take into consideration the local context”. The local lecturers firstly contacted the off shore administration team to report the concerns about assessment tasks. The local lecturers, at times, expressed some lack of clarity, or demonstrated a lack of expertise in marking the Australian based assessment tasks. Two things resulted from this problematic situation. Firstly the local tutors were provided with some training from the host university to enhance their professional skills as academics, particularly in relation to assessment. Secondly, the local lecturers proposed some alternative assessment tasks that were deemed to be more context-specific and in keeping with student learning needs. These were forwarded to the Australian team for consideration and quality checking. The onshore team carefully monitored issues of equivalence and the tasks required ratification at the Faculty Management level. Both parties have affirmed this approach and the concept of collaborative design of assessment tasks is now in place.

**Principle 4 for action: local workshops on writing skills for students**

The administration team identified a need to enhance the quality of student writing. This was in response to student requests for workshops conducted by Australian academics to address their weaknesses in preparing academic papers that met the standards required by Australian universities and also allowed the students to achieve the high grades that they aspired to achieve. The administration team was planning to embark on these workshops when the Australian team was available to conduct such workshops off shore. It was the view of the administrative team the workshops could become a part of the orientation programme and be supported through an online medium. To date this is yet to be enacted.

**Conclusion**

The key actions that were identified in the ongoing discussions centered on three key concepts: curriculum responsivity, streamlined communication and assessment adjustments. These three concepts further refined what is effectively a
well-designed and effectively delivered transnational programme. The sustained success can be attributed to a strong and well-informed programme leader who has a genuine commitment to the partnership and a sound understanding of the cultural contexts of nursing in Hong Kong. Further, the building of consistency across contexts, open communication and a commitment to equivalence in design and delivery underpins the success of this programme.