CASE STUDY 8: A MASTER OF EDUCATION PROGRAMME DELIVERED IN SINGAPORE BY AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Part 1: Context

1.1. The situation/context of delivery
This Master of Education (MEd) degree is offered at the site of a local philanthropic society in Singapore. It is taught by staff members of the School of Education within an Australian ‘sandstone’ university which was established in the 19th century, and the degree is awarded by the University. The School of Education is located in the Faculty of the Professions, one of the University’s five faculties. Along with offering teacher preparation programmes, the School offers a number of postgraduate degrees. Of these, the MEd is well established. In 2007, it was offered for the first time through the philanthropic society in Singapore.

The philanthropic society was founded in the nineteenth century. Its original function was to look after the religious and welfare needs of immigrant Chinese. As it grew and flourished it also turned its attention to the needs of the young, and not only those of Chinese background, but all young people in the nation. Managed by a council elected from amongst its members, it has its own headquarters, which contains administrative offices, a cultural centre and a heritage hall. Through its education centre it seeks to play a major part in Singaporean society.

One offering of the Society is the sandstone university’s MEd degree. This is delivered by visiting University staff through condensed courses in short periods of time, rather than through the more traditional mode of weekly lectures. The main purpose is to provide Singaporean educationalists with an academic qualification which will assist them in their work, and in improving education across the educational sector. While some of the students are teachers, the programme is tailored to suit a wide variety of educators working in other educational positions.

1.2. Cultural context, and teaching and learning offshore
There is no significant difference between the cultural context at this level of academic delivery in Australia and Singapore. There is a major challenge of trying to fit in with various other activities in which Singaporean students are involved, especially those associated with Chinese New Year. Both staff and students regularly negotiate so that academic work can take place, yet expectations regarding engagement in cultural activities can also be met.

A significant issue arose a number of years ago, however, in terms of how the University Department saw the programme, as opposed to what the philanthropic society saw that it should be. To put it simply, the former considered that the programme should only be offered to school teachers with the necessary entry qualifications. Not only did this mean that the number of students was very small and threatening the financial viability of the programme, but also that the range of experiences of the students was very narrow and thus there was little room for them to learn from each other. A number of highly qualified applicants from outside the ‘schooling sector’ applied each year to study the MEd, but were rejected because they were not employed in a school.
The Administrative Officer at the Society in Singapore favoured admitting a broader range of applicants, while still insisting on high standards of academic entry. A major review of all of the activities of the School also supported this view.

Eventually, the entry requirement was broadened such that it became possible to enrol candidates other than teachers for the degree. In 2012, the Admission Criteria were as follows:

Admission Criteria

- Undergraduate degree or equivalent from the University, or a degree of another institution accepted by the Faculty
- The Faculty may accept as a candidate for the degree a person who does not satisfy the requirement of admission above but who had presented evidence satisfactory to the Faculty of fitness to undertake the work of the degree.

Advance Standing

- Applicants who have an undergraduate degree in education may be granted 24 units advanced standing and required to complete 8 courses (24 units) to meet the requirements for the Master of Education.
- Applicants who have an undergraduate degree other than education, but have significant teaching experience may be granted 12 units advanced standing and only required to complete 12 courses (36 units) to meet the requirements for the Master of Education.

The structure of the course was also changed to ensure that all candidates would take a number of more generic education units than had hitherto been the case, thus facilitating the induction of the broader cohort into the culture of Education as a field of study.

The changes in the duration, delivery and content of the programme is illustrated as follows:

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<tr>
<th>A Comparison of Programme Duration Delivery and Content 2009-2012</th>
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<td><strong>2009</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Average duration for MEd</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Minimum Duration</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Maximum duration</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Number of courses to enrol per term</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total number of hours for each course:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total number of contact hours for MED</strong></td>
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<td>Minimum Enrolment Requirements</td>
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<td>Frequency</td>
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<td>Intensive Teaching Block</td>
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<td>Total duration for the each course</td>
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| Course Structure | Students are required to complete 6 Generic Courses, as follows:  
   i. Innovations in Teaching  
   ii. Multicultural Society and Educational Policy  
   iii. Curriculum Design and Evaluation  
   iv. Neuroscience and Education  
   v. Education Enquiry and Research  
   vi. Minor Research Project | Students are required to complete 4 Core Courses, as follows:  
   i. Educational Policy Studies  
   ii. Curriculum Development and Innovation  
   iii. Pedagogical Engagement and Learning  
   iv. Assessing Testing and Measurement |  
   Students are required to choose 12 Electives from the following:  
   - Multicultural Society and Education Policy  
   - Neuroscience and Education  
   - Philosophical Underpinning of IB - A Case Study Approach  
   - Qualitative Approaches to Educational Research  
   - Research Based Learning and Teaching  
   - Reflective Practice in Learning and Teaching  
   - University Teaching for Effective Student Learning  
   - Vocational Education Contexts  
   - Alternative Education  
   - Curriculum Design and Evaluation  
   - Curriculum Development Assessment and Evaluation |
1.3. Ensuring/safeguarding quality of the programme
At the home campus in Australia an MEd unit is normally taught by means of one lecture a week for 12 weeks. In this MEd programme in Singapore, however, it is delivered by intensive mode over a period of seven weeks. This takes place for each unit as follows:

- A 15 hour teaching block of 3 days from 7.00pm - 10.00pm on a Friday, from 1.00am - 8.00pm Saturday and from 9.00am - 4.00pm on Sunday.
- Students and lecturer engaging in on-line contact over a 3 week period.
- Students complete two assignments for each unit in a three week period following stages one and two.
- A 15 hour teaching block of 3 days from 7.00pm - 10.00 pm on a Friday, from 1.00am - 8.00pm Saturday and from 9.00am - 4.00pm on Sunday.

The overall course-contact time per unit is 30 hours.

Most units are assessed by essays.

Course materials are forwarded to Singapore for copying and distribution well before the course gets underway.

Those who present the units are all staff members of the University and are located on the home campus. They write all of the course materials themselves. In the writing process they share their work with each other, inviting feedback and making appropriate adjustments. This is deemed by them to be of great benefit and to be a very enjoyable experience.

1.4. Quality assurance in place for transnational programmes
The School of Education uses a standard template which has been prepared for all schools in the Faculty for the production of materials for teaching offshore. This template is approved by academic committees within the Schools. The School of

| Certification | Postgraduate students who successfully complete the Master of Education will be awarded the Master of Education degree by the University of Adelaide. The degree and transcript will be the same as that awarded to on-campus students. | Postgraduate students who successfully complete the Master of Education will be awarded the Master of Education degree by the University of Adelaide. The degree and transcript will be the same as that awarded to on-campus students. | • Educational Inquiry  
• Education Major Project (6 Units)  
• Education Minor Project (3 Units)  
• Innovations in Teaching, Learning & Assessment  
• Introduction to Quantitative Educational Methods  
• Leadership in Diverse Contexts |
Education, like the other schools, also has a certain amount of freedom to tailor what is produced to the particular circumstances of the offshore site.

Course materials for each MEd unit initially are prepared within the School by members of the teaching team. Once they feel they are appropriate and in line with the template, the materials are forwarded to the Faculty’s Administrative Officer, who checks them for quality of production. They are returned to teaching-team members for amendments, if deemed necessary. The final product is produced in electronic form to make it easy to forward it to Singapore.

1.5. **How existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning**

Existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning in a number of positive ways:

- The course structure and teaching schedule appeal to all parties – teachers, administrators and students.
- At the Society, there is satisfaction with arrangements aimed at ensuring quality teaching and learning. Teaching material is forwarded from the University long before teaching takes place, so that they can be copied and compiled in Singapore for distribution to students well before teaching takes place.
- All parties consider that the materials are well-prepared.
- All parties are happy with the arrangement whereby assignments are forwarded directly by each student to the FAO in the University, rather than directly to the University, or to staff at the Society. The FAO is also responsible for such administrative matters as the processing of enrolments and assessments and this works smoothly.
- All teaching staff appreciate the procedure whereby, before they travel offshore to teach, the FAO provides them with a travel pack containing information on such matters as flights, cab-charges, accommodation, health insurance and important telephone numbers.
- Every aspect of teaching is prepared in advance, and is done so in great detail.
- The content of the units is regularly checked and re-checked to ensure it connects to realities and examples from Singaporean society.
- Staff from the University are also very happy with the arrangements regarding additional payment for teaching, accommodation and per diem. They also welcome the efforts to make timetabling flexible to suit their other commitments.
- Students and the staff at the Society are happy with the procedure of using only Australian-based academics and not using local-based academics. This is to ensure that the experience is as close as possible to what one would have as a student if one were enrolled on campus in Australia.

**Part 2: Mapping Principles to Practice in Teaching and Learning**

Participants discussed their practices in terms of the comprehensive set of principles provided to them. They considered that all of the principles had application to their situation. They then focused particularly on what they all termed “very practical”, yet
very important concerns specifically to do with teaching and learning. Five concerns in particular kept recurring which were common to all participants.

### 2.1 How existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning

The five concerns which kept recurring and which were common to all participants are detailed below. Also, it will be noted that the particular quality assurance principles to which each relates are also detailed:

**Concern 1:** Ways have to be found to encourage students to contact lecturers during the period between lecture blocks.

**Principle to which it relates:**

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

**Concern 2:** Ways have to be found to ensure there is more interaction in class between the lecturer and the students, including encouraging students to ask more questions

**Principles to which it relates:**

**Curriculum:**
- 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.

**Pedagogy:**
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally determined teaching/learning practices.
- Levels of English competency required to undertake courses by students whose first language is other than English, should be reviewed regularly to ensure congruency between the required level and course materials.
- Student achievement of learning outcomes should be the arbiter for evaluating the merit of effectiveness of curriculum delivery.

**Concern 3:** Ways have to be found to ensure there is more interaction in class between the students themselves.

**Principles to which it relates:**

**Curriculum:**
- Cultural sensitivity should always be considered in the preparation of course material, its delivery and the assessment of students’ work.
Pedagogy:
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally determined teaching/learning practices.

Concern 4: Ways have to be found to help students become more comfortable in class so that they can overcome their reticence to speak out clearly

Principle to which it relates:

Pedagogy:
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally determined teaching/learning practices.

Concern 5: Ways have to be found to help students move away from speaking very softly in class and adopt a more confident tone in their discussions

Principle to which it relates:

Pedagogy:
- Programme delivery should be responsive to culturally determined teaching/learning practices.

Each of these 5 concerns found expression in 3 issues which were raised and then addressed as follows:

Issue 1

The Problem
The characteristics of students enrolled in an MEd measurement and assessment unit in Singapore varied considerably in terms of ethnicity, age, English competence, and academic background. While differences in such matters among Singaporean students are not unusual, the nature of the unit required a modest level of competence in statistical analysis. Those competent in statistical analysis did well but were usually in a minority, while the majority struggled.

An added difficulty for students who lacked competence in statistical analysis was that the Compressed Mode of delivery to which they were required to conform, meant that opportunities for the lecturer to develop students’ skills cumulatively (available to Australian students studying in Standard Mode) was lacking.

Briefly, the modes of delivery are as follows:

1. The Standard Mode of delivery to onshore students is comprised of weekly lectures of between 2½-3 hours over a period of 10-13 weeks. During each lecture, students are encouraged to interject to clarify matters referable to its content and engage in questioning. The lecturer aims to ensure unit content and concepts are learned in a coherent, comprehensive, and consistent manner.
2. The *Compressed Mode* of delivery to offshore students comprises two intensive lecture periods of four days each during which the full complement of lectures is delivered with three weeks between each.

**Plan**

Within the constraints of the time provided for delivery in *Compressed Mode*, the aim of the three lecturers involved was to work with support-personnel at the Singapore campus to provide offshore students with learning experiences that would enhance their learning experience by:

1. Requiring them to participate in group assignments, with each group having some students with the collective skills and abilities required to complete each assignment satisfactorily.

2. Completing most of the work over the internet using ‘blackboard’ and personal email.

3. Working in groups of four. The lecturer was aware that the larger the group the greater the potential for some students to become ‘passengers’, rather than active participants. Furthermore, it was reasoned that the greater the size of the group, the less individual engagement would occur.

4. Providing opportunities for all students to engage in peer teaching/tutoring.

5. Structuring each assignment in such a way that each member would be required to demonstrate his, or her, contribution to the final outcome, both directly and indirectly. This would include:

   - accepting responsibility for the completion of a particular section(s) of the assignment;
   - providing expertise, information, advice and encouragement to group members; and
   - writing a brief report on the completed assignment, consisting of:
     - a summary of one’s contribution;
     - a proposed numerical assessment of the assignment based on a ‘rubric’ provided by the lecturer; and
     - a general comment regarding the overall outcome, including any problems which the group might have encountered and their resolution.

**Feedback**

Although a significant number of students were initially reticent to work in groups, a greater degree of acceptance was noted when they became aware that their composition would be determined by the lecturer. Furthermore, when advised that each person allocated would possess the skills required to complete the assignment satisfactorily, each student took it upon himself, or herself, to make a significant contribution to the final outcome.
In general terms, the results were as follows:

1. Students became actively engaged with course materials, and became knowledgeable and willing to participate in both group and general discussions.
2. Students’ attitudes to one another and the lecturer were positive and they showed willingness to share their work and discuss their problems and successes.
3. Group assignments set for the period between the two compressed study periods were approached with a purpose and enthusiasm which was reflected in positive results.
4. Although each group was required to provide one submission, the requirement that students in each group were also required to provide a written submission regarding their contribution resulted in a proactive and professional approach to the finished product.
5. The collaborative nature of the work which students were required to undertake, appeared to give them confidence in their communication with each other.
6. As each group progressed with the assignments, not only did the members become more confident in expressing themselves within their groups, they also became more confident with expressing themselves to other groups. This was a significant departure from the practice of preparing individual assignments in the past, where students during the three week break between study periods, tended to ‘go to ground’.
7. It was noted by the principal lecturer involved in executing the plan that the success of the general structure of group assignments for Singaporean students could have benefits for Australian students also.
8. Both the lecturer and the administrators in Singapore expressed their satisfaction with the approach as a result of the positive feedback received.

Issue 2

The Problem
A lecturer who had been teaching in Singapore for some years was concerned that students in a unit he was teaching in *Multiculturalism and Ethnicity in Education* were generally reluctant to engage in class discussions. Indeed, it was clear that the majority did not want to be engaged in any way by the lecturer where an oral response was required. The lecturer was concerned about their reluctance to engage with him. It was also his view that students’ written responses provided were ‘bookish’. In other words, they did not demonstrate an understanding which they could translate into their professional lives with empathy and understanding.

It was imperative that an approach be adopted which resulted in students appreciating life in other cultures while demonstrating their own with confidence and dignity. Essentially, it was important that students recognise that cultural difference is not about inferiority or superiority, but about understanding culture in context.

Plan
The plan was to work with support personnel at the Singapore campus to provide offshore students within the constraints of the time available for delivery in *Compressed Mode* with learning experiences that would enhance their understanding of multiculturalism and education through the sharing of experiences. They were to share their own experiences and those of other students enrolled in the unit and discuss them within the context of wider Singaporean society. They were also told that they would be required to present cultural artefacts, dress, stories, photographs, artistic performance, food indeed any appropriate item which indicated the cultural imprint of the group which they wished to represent to their peers.

The strategy involved informing students two weeks before the programme commenced that the following is the ethnic composition, and religion and language situation in Singapore:

- **Ethnic Composition**: Chinese 76.7%, Malay 14%, Indian 7.9%, other 1.4%
- **Religions**: Buddhist (Chinese), Muslim (Malays), Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Taoist, Confucianist
- **Language**: Singapore has four national languages: Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English. For business and politics, English is the language of choice.

**Feedback**

1. During the presentations, it became clear that within cultural and religious groups in Singapore differences exist.
2. Students were keen to demonstrate aspects of their culture which they regarded as significant.
3. Students were keen to ask questions of one another and clarification was sought regarding various practices.
4. The exercise provided a ‘springboard’ for further discussion during the lecture series and was reflected in the assignments submitted by students.
5. The lecturer and the Singaporean administrators were pleased with students’ responses, which reflected an acceptance of unity (being Singaporean) and diversity (one’s cultural heritage and that of others).

**Issue 3**

**The Problem**
Irrespective of the unit being taught, lecturers at the Society in Singapore were concerned about the reluctance of Singaporean students to speak up in class. Lecturers reported that students were generally self-conscious, were concerned about their accents, English pronunciation and competence in spoken English, and were unwilling to share their cultural backgrounds and experience of life and work. The general impression was that they were ‘bookish’ and uncommunicative, and that this made it difficult to connect with them intellectually and personally.

**Plan**
The plan was for the Australian lecturers to work with the Singapore-based support personnel to provide offshore students in Singapore within the constraints of the time provided for delivery in *Compressed Mode* with learning experiences that would enhance their learning and communication skills. Lecturers were encouraged to begin their first lecture period by using themselves as models of difference, rather than as exemplars of cultural superiority. To this end they were to draw attention to the peculiarities they themselves saw in their own pronunciations, accents and vocabulary, and to ask students to comment.

**Feedback**

Overall, students:

1. Took the opportunity to ask questions about cultural diversity;
2. Attempted to compare and contrast cultures within Singapore and Western societies, including Australia;
3. Appeared to be more relaxed with one another and with their lecturer than previous groups had been;
4. Demonstrated a willingness to initiate discussion and be relaxed with one another;
5. Approached the lecturer after classes to discuss matters of professional and personal interest;
6. Were keen to exchange email addresses to assist one another with their studies;
7. Advised administrators at the Society in Singapore of their increased understanding of culture; and
8. Produced assignments that reflected a more open and objective and less ‘bookish’ approach to their preparation than had previously been the case.

As a result of representations by the Society in Singapore to the university in Australia, the MEd programme which had been offered there since 2007 had its student base widened in 2012 to include those working as educators in settings other than traditional educational institutions. It might be expected that the student experience in both Australia and Singapore was markedly different. This, however, was not the case, despite the cultural differences that exist between both societies. The major challenges identified were logistical, particularly accommodating cultural, national and personal events.

When the lecturers involved in this project were requested to consider the principles for ensuring quality ones which had most application to their particular situations they focussed on what they all termed the principles which related to the “very practical”, ones pertaining specifically to teaching and learning”. In particular, they focused on the five principles outlined above. Their concerns were then distilled into three problems they had in delivering the programme; namely, what strategies to use to lift the level of competence in statistical analysis, what strategies to use to engage students in various ways which were less ‘bookish’ (enabling them to translate their learning into their professional lives with empathy and understanding), and what
strategies to use to facilitate students being comfortable about speaking up in class and generally being more confident about expressing their opinions.

The success experienced in the use of the strategies identified resulted from the commitment of the academics involved, not only to improve their practice but also to enhance the learning experiences of their students. The action learning projects in which they engaged were approached with a commitment to embed quality principles into the delivery of the offshore programmes. It was recognised that their efforts in this regard to improve offshore delivery could also yield benefits if used to improve quality delivery of programmes at the home campus.