CASE STUDY 9: A MASTER OF EDUCATION PROGRAMME DELIVERED IN SINGAPORE AT A LOCAL POLYTECHNIC 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 polytechnic in Singapore. It is taught by staff members of the School of Education within an Australian ‘sandstone’ university. This is the same sandstone university which offers an MEd degree through an arrangement with a local philanthropic society in Singapore (see Case Study 8). Again, the degree is awarded by the University. The programmes offered at the two institutions, however, differ in a number of ways. First, while the programme offered through the arrangement with the philanthropic society is generic in order to accommodate a wide range of students from different backgrounds, that offered at the polytechnic is specially tailored for academic staff members of that institution. Secondly, while the programme offered at the philanthropic society has been underway for a number of years, the programme at the polytechnic had not long commenced at the time this case study was being undertaken. Thirdly, while the programme offered through the arrangement with the philanthropic society is taught by University staff members with extensive experience teaching offshore, that offered at the polytechnic is taught by a team comprised of a number of staff members teaching offshore for the first time in their careers.

The polytechnic is one of a number in Singapore. It is also one of the first to have been established. It was originally established by a private provider, but once it was established it was handed over to the state. The private provider, however, continues to supplement the state funding of the institution and also continues to have an involvement with it in a number of other ways. It has an enrolment of about 15,000 full-time students, 3000 part-time students and an alumni community of about 1,200,000. On its spacious campus it offers 49 full-time 3-year diploma courses through seven academic schools.

The MEd degree offered by the sandstone university is taught in the same mode as the one taught through the arrangement with the local philanthropic society. The University staff visit to teach condensed courses in short periods of time, rather than through the more traditional mode of weekly lectures. The main purpose is to provide an education for selected staff members who have strong academic qualifications, but little background in educational theory, and particularly in pedagogical theory.

1.2. Cultural context and teaching and learning offshore
As is the case with the programme offered in conjunction with the local philanthropic society, there is no significant difference in the cultural context at this level of academic delivery between Australia and Singapore. Again, 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, and appropriate negotiation takes place.
The case, however, is a particularly interesting one since in the teaching team of seven, three are totally new to teaching offshore. This provided the opportunity to focus on how they, working with their fellow team members and with support-colleagues in Singapore, could fit into the local environment, as well as into the institution’s teaching environment, and deal with any issues that might arise.

All of the team members were also faced with the reality that while their students were academic members of staff and were highly qualified in their teaching-subject specialisms, they did not have a deep understanding of educational theory. Indeed, it was this situation which prompted the authorities at the polytechnic to take the initiative and offer a programme specially tailored to rectifying the situation. There was particular concern that the academic staff members in question were seriously lacking in pedagogical theory and that this was having an influence on the quality of their teaching and learning. The challenge for the teaching team was to be able to conceptualise and tailor their units to meet the needs of a student cohort of this nature. In other words, they had to assume that they were going to be teaching students with hardly any background knowledge and also who did not share a discourse which would be common amongst their more usual student cohort.

The programme follows the ‘traditional’ pattern for the University’s MEd degree. In other words, students study 6 units of course work, followed by a double unit which involves doing a major project. The units, however, are specially chosen to give students generic knowledge in pedagogy. The units are as follows:

- Pedagogical Engagement and Learning
- Online Learning Design, Assessment and Evaluation
- Assessment and Evaluation in Education
- Neuroscience and Education
- Curriculum Development and Innovation
- Educational Inquiry
- Education Major Project.

The first four units are clearly designed to provide students with generic pedagogical knowledge. The next, entitled ‘Curriculum Development and Innovation’, is designed to help students place this pedagogical knowledge within a broader framework by dealing with issues of curriculum design, curriculum development and curriculum change. The final two units are designed to facilitate students in connecting theory to practice through engagement in some research related to their own situations. They are taught the necessary skills in the unit entitled ‘Educational Inquiry’. These skills, along with the theoretical knowledge base gained from engagement in the first four units, provide them with the foundation for engagement in the major project.

1.3. Ensuring/safeguarding quality of the programme

At the home campus the MEd unit is normally taught by means of one lecture a week for 12 weeks. This MEd programme in Singapore, as with the MEd programme taught through the arrangement with the philanthropic society, is delivered by intensive mode There is, however, one difference between the mode of delivery at the philanthropic society and that offered here
at the polytechnic. The delivery at the former, it will be recalled, takes place over two visits, with on-line consultation between lecturers and students in the intervening period. In the case of the polytechnic, there is only one visit for each unit, but it takes place over five days. The first four days consists of face-to-face intensive teaching (from Monday to Thursday from 9.00am to 5.00pm). All day Friday is devoted to consultations between the lecturer and individual students. All are agreed, however, that there is no effect on the quality of the programme. The arrangement exists simply to be able to teach the programme to the students at the polytechnic during their vacation periods. The amount of tuition is the same and the amount of consultation time is the same.

As with the programme through the arrangement with the private provider:

- 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, 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.

1.4. Quality assurance in place for transnational programmes
The same quality assurance procedures are used as are outlined in the case entitled ‘A Master of Education degree offered in Singapore through an arrangement between a sandstone university and a local philanthropic society’.

1.5. How existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning
The same quality assurance systems attending to teaching and learning as are outlined in the case entitled ‘A Master of Education degree offered in Singapore through an arrangement between a sandstone university and a local philanthropic society’, are used. Some students, however, enrol initially in the first four units as Graduate Certificate students. If their performance in these units is successful, they can then choose to take the remaining units for the degree.

Part 2: Mapping Principles to Practice in Teaching and Learning
In addressing this matter, 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 issues which, while not specifically concerning teaching and learning, would impact on the quality of teaching and learning if not addressed. Three issues in particular kept recurring

2.1 How existing quality assurance systems attend to teaching and learning
Three 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 is also detailed:

**Concern 1**: Ways have to be found to reduce the stress on staff working offshore, especially where there might be an expectation that one works at the home campus on a Friday before, or a Monday after, their teaching in Singapore.

**Principles to which it relates:**

**Welfare**
- *Classification of offshore work for those who fly-un and fly-out*
- Offshore work should always be regarded:
  - as non-standard;
  - voluntary; and
  - where practicable, distributed among staff who volunteer.

**Rewards and Recognition**
- Where a full campus workload is maintained, in addition to undertaking offshore activities, staff members should receive additional payments.

**Non-monetary Compensation**
- Rewards and recognition for participation in offshore programmes may also include reductions in onshore activities in both pre and post offshore phases.

**Pre-Departure**
- Before an offshore programme commences, staff should agree to a written plan indicating the itinerary/travel plan.

**Concern 2**: Ways have to be found to ensure that onshore students are not disadvantaged as a result of lecturers being absent from the home campus.

**Principles to which it relates:**

**Welfare**
- *Participation*
  - When determining staff participation in offshore programmes, those responsible should ensure that arrangements have been made to fulfil their on-campus responsibilities;
  - Where offshore activities are being undertaken in addition to maintaining a ‘full’ academic workload, faculties should ensure that workloads are reasonable.
Concern 3: Ways have to be found to ensure staff, and especially staff new to teaching offshore, do not develop feelings of isolation when teaching overseas.

**Principles to which it relates:**

Welfare

*Offshore Facilities and Resources*

- Before the deployment of staff offshore, universities should ensure that the provision of appropriate facilities exist for staff to undertake the required work.

*Staff Development*

- 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;
- Formal comprehensive training of staff engaged to provide offshore teaching should take place before their deployment commences;
- Staff appointed offshore should fulfil 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;
- All staff should be provided with an ‘offshore manual’ which addresses matters such as:
  - accommodation;
  - personal safety and any security issues;
  - vaccinations and health care concerns, including the use of Australian prescription medicines offshore;
  - passport and visa arrangements;
  - appropriate clothing;
  - local currency, including exchange rates and banking facilities.
  - shopping and restaurants
  - transportation and communication including internet and email facilities; and
  - important contact numbers.

*Equity*

Universities should ensure that all staff have equal opportunity to participate in offshore programmes by ensuring that:

1. family friendly policies are developed that do not disadvantage staff who have familial responsibilities; and
2. adequate compensation is provided for staff who may incur additional expense related to their familial responsibilities.

Interestingly, while staff raised the latter 3 concerns, all of which related primarily to their own performance, they chose to identify 3 problems (requiring action plans) that related to the pedagogical needs of students. Each of these will now be considered in turn:
Issue 1

The Problem
The modes of delivery for Singaporean and Australian students are as follows:

1. The Compressed Mode (Singapore) 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.
2. The Standard Mode (Australia) of delivery to onshore students comprised weekly lectures of between 2½ - 3 hours over a period of 10-13 weeks.

Regardless of the mode of study, students are required to submit two assignments by the end of the unit.

The lecturers from the Australian university who taught the Master of Education (MEd) degree offered at the Polytechnic in Singapore principally for the benefit of staff employed at that institution and who also had experience teaching an MEd course at another institution in Singapore, found that students at the Polytechnic, demonstrated reticence to engage with them in discussion during lectures.

Plan
The plan of action involved the development of Thinking Boxes (squares and rectangles) to stimulate interaction between the lecturer and the students, and between the students themselves. The thinking boxes were utilised in groups to encourage students to focus on the questions, rather than on one another, although it was hoped that eventually concentrating on one another would develop as an important offshoot of the strategy.

Each of the six modules of the unit was treated in terms of focus questions presented in Thinking Boxes. The questions were of varying complexity, although there was no attempt to present them with increasing conceptual difficulty.

Before the commencement of the ‘First Study Period’, students were provided with instructions regarding the process and the questions in the Thinking Boxes. The introduction given to students was as follows:

- The content of these boxes has been selected to encourage you to reflect on the different course elements, and to begin to relate these together and to your own knowledge and experiences.
- You may complete as many boxes as you wish (either starred and unstarred), and we will discuss some of these in our face-to-face sessions, or you can email me at any time with your responses to the boxes, and questions about them.
- I will respond to this as quickly as possible (Lecturer’s email address provided). As part of your final assessment you MUST submit, in writing, responses to at least six (6) of the starred boxes. Of these six, one should be from each module. You may submit additional responses to starred or unstarred boxes if you wish. You should not
normally need to write more than 3-4 pages on any answer, and for some it will be much less.

- You can submit by email at any time you like, though all six must be completed and submitted before the end of the first week after my second visit (Date provided). If you submit additional answers for assessment (from starred or unstarred boxes), these will add a formal contribution (up to 10%) to your final mark.
- Please make it clear when you submit whether your submission is for assessment or for feedback only.

The manner in which the Thinking Boxes were set out was as follows:

**MODULE 1**

**Thinking Box 1.1 (Unstarred)**

Look at the various definitions of curriculum. What different focuses have they? Which one(s) are closest to your view? Which differ?

**Thinking box 1:2 (Starred *****)**

Curriculum can be generated at government level, or at a more local level. What are the benefits and disadvantages of each?

Using these boxes, students were encouraged to:

1. Reflect on the unit as they progressed through the modules;
2. Make personal decisions regarding which ‘boxes’ they wished to complete;
3. Consult with the lecturer at any time during the study periods and the break between them, as required.
4. Submit additional work for which credit of up to 10% would contribute towards their final mark

**Feedback**

The lecturers indicated that before its implementation they were unclear as to the extent the strategy might succeed. Their principal motivation was not only to engage their students with themselves and each other, but also to provide a reward to those who made the effort to reflect and engage during the period of instruction, which now included the indirect period between the first and second study periods.

The lecturers claimed that the strategy had the following pedagogical benefits:

1. Students became actively engaged with course materials and willing to participate in both group and general discussions;
2. Students’ attitudes to one another and the lecturer were positive, with a willingness to share their work and discuss their problems and successes during class and by email with the lecturer and each other;
3. Students, as reported by the Polytechnic, involved in the unit were openly discussing their progress, something which was not normal;
4. A level of competition ensued between students, who endeavoured to increase their final result normally determined by the results of two assignments allocated up to 10% of the final mark. Some students appeared to regard this as a ‘soft’ means of increasing their result, but it did have the benefit of increasing participation;
5. Both the lecturers and the administrators at the Polytechnic not only expressed their satisfaction at the manner in which the teaching staff undertaking the unit had responded to the material being taught by incorporating it into their teaching duties, but also their willingness to share their resulting experiences with one another.

Issue 2

The Problem
It will be recalled that by comparison, the modes of delivery for Singaporean and Australian students are as follows:

1. Compressed Mode (Singapore) 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.
2. The Standard Mode (Australia) of delivery to onshore students comprised weekly lectures of between 2½ -3 hours over a period of 10-13 weeks.

Regardless of the mode of study, students are required to submit two assignments by the end of the unit.

The unit taught entitled Innovations in Education, required the development of a website by students working in groups.

The lecturers explained the problems as follows:

In the case of our first assignment (creating a website for a ‘School of the Future’) for the Innovations course, students from my last cohort seemed to cram at the last minute to put together a website with information about their ‘School of the Future’. They provided a variety of reasons for this last minute completion of the assignment, including:

a. work commitments;
b. a lack of computing and website building skills;
c. a lack of a full understanding of what the assignment requires;
d. group members are hard to reach.
Plan
The lecturers decided to deal with excuses (b) and (c) by establishing a forum on the home campus website, *Learning Management System*, known as *MyUni*, to encourage students to ‘bounce around’ ideas and to ask questions of them and other students regarding the assignment.

When the lecturers attempted to familiarise students with the process during the first study period, they were not able to do so because of Internet connection problems. However, time was spent explaining the practices, processes and procedures to students, which they were expected to follow. When the lecturers checked the extent of student activity on the forum nearly two weeks later, one wrote: “I checked the same forum just a few minutes ago and, unfortunately, not a single entry can be seen”.

The lecturers decided that:

1. It was important for the success of the strategy to make it clear to students that there would only be one study period rather than two, including the three week break between the lecture periods;
2. The three weeks between the lecture periods was for the purpose of completing the website task; and
3. The formation of a website would comprise 10% of assignment 1. As part of the assignment, students in each group would have to demonstrate their individual contribution to the overall outcome when it was submitted at the end of week seven.

Feedback
As a result of their experiences, the lecturers, personnel at the polytechnic, and the students felt that the following suggestions could result in improved outcomes:

1. Students should be made aware, in writing, that the study period consists of ONE STUDY PERIOD consisting of two intensive periods of 4 days each, with three weeks between each.

2. The requirements for the preparation of the website should be clearly defined, including the allocation of marks based on a well-defined rubric.

3. Internet accessibility and reliability should be appropriate to ensure that the project is not compromised before it commences.

4. The lecturers could consider including ‘threads’ on the ‘forum’ to stimulate discussion, and also including short innovative articles and ideas regarding schools of the future, and invite students to submit any which they might have.

5. Consideration should be given to contacting students individually to encourage participation and establish expectations.

6. Students should be encouraged to work together as a group and as a cohort to facilitate a common spirit of purpose and engagement.
Issue 3

The Problem
The unit, *Culture and Policy in Education*, required students to engage with the lecturers and with one another during the three weeks between each four day intensive teaching period. Unfortunately, this did not occur.

Plan
To engage students throughout the intensive two teaching periods separated by a three week break, students would be required to submit Assignment 1 at the end of the three week break, effectively resulting in one continuous teaching block. Students were required to comply with the following:

- Log onto MyUni (Learning Management System) once a week and enter their progress on Assignment 1 in the appropriate forum in the discussion board.
- At the commencement of each of the first three intensive days, students would be reminded of the importance of the activity.
- Where difficulty was experienced in accessing MyUni, students would be required to communicate with the lecturer by email.
- Share appropriate resources and regularly engage with the lecturer and other students.
- Work in small groups and post their findings on MyUni, with their composition changing regularly.

Feedback
The lecturers, the polytechnic personnel and the student, reported the following:

1. Student participation improved markedly;
2. A greater sense of camaraderie than previously existed was noted at the commencement of the second intensive teaching period;
3. Regular use of MyUni resulted in a sharing platform which was widely and profitably accessed by students;
4. The level of interaction between the lecturers and students, and between students themselves, increased markedly;
5. Cooperative learning techniques used were very successfully. One lecturer reported the following:

Some of the techniques I used were very basic but I was surprised with how effective they were – for example when we met for the first evening of the second intensive I opened the intensive by using a basic, co-operative learning activity – I played music while the students moved around the room – when I stopped the music they had to share an innovative practice they had used in their classroom recently (repeated 3 times). It sounds completely childish but I explained that it was an ‘innovative’ technique that could be used in the classroom and it really got everyone moving, talking, sharing etc. It also lightened the atmosphere.
6. The submission rate (of a cohort of 11 students) at the end of the three week break was 100 per cent
7. In consultation with students and the lecturers, it was agreed that 10% of the final grade for the unit would reflect on-line participation. This further motivated students to engage in the on-line participation.

This case study involved staff from an Australian university teaching an MEd programme to selected staff employed at a Polytechnic in Singapore. Teaching staff at another higher education institution who are highly academically qualified was deemed to be somewhat daunting from the outset for the seven Australian lecturers, of whom three were totally new to teaching offshore (but were not novice lecturers). They also had the challenge of teaching students with hardly any background knowledge in Education Studies. The principles they identified as having application to this situation have been outlined above. The overall focus was on welfare issues which, they deemed, could adversely impact upon teaching and learning if not addressed.

Cogitation of the above-mentioned principles led to the identification of three issues to be addressed. The action plans developed were, in the view of the participants, highly successful. In noting this, it is important to recognise that the participants not only developed very sensible, practical and realistic plans, but went about implementing them in a manner which indicated their high level of professionalism. Their experiences in implementing the action plans also led them to appreciate that they need to be constantly monitoring the efficacy of their curriculum pedagogical and welfare-related practices in light of the possibility that their student cohorts offshore may change yet again in terms of their cultural, academic and professional backgrounds. This was an unintended, yet very valuable, consequence, of engaging in the practice.