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Creating New Educational Structures and Processes for Off-shore Distance Education

Terry Evans & Karen Tregenza

Faculty of Education, Deakin University

INTRODUCTION

Australia's long history of distance education in both the school and tertiary education sectors has contributed to a wealth of experience and expertise in providing courses within Australia. This experience has regularly been exported overseas by means of consultancies, staff movements etc. There are also instances of off-shore enrolments in Australian distance education programs. However, increasingly, Australian educational institutions are offering their courses off-shore, 'in-country', using forms of distance education—explicitly and implicitly—to these ends. Some of these institutions are established dual mode organisations which use and adapt their distance education structures to serve the new international circumstances; others may have little Australian involvement in distance education and need to establish structures and processes to provide 'learning resources' or 'independent study materials' for their new 'clients'. This paper explores some of the elements involved in establishing the structures and processes to 'deliver' Australian higher education courses off-shore. It draws on work being conducted for a three year project funded by the Australian Research Council entitled *Australian distance education in Hong Kong and Papua New Guinea: an investigation of the consequences of internationalising education*¹. The discussion concentrates on the experiences of Australian providers and their off-shore partners in building the structures and processes for offering Australian courses in the students' country of origin. In particular, the focus is on the first stages of building an off-shore education program as an extension of an Australian university's local program.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Structures and processes

The sub-theme of the conference to which this paper is addressed is entitled *Creating new educational structures*. However, in the context of the authors' work on the project, and Evans's previous work in distance education with Daryl Nation, it is difficult to discuss structures without recognising that they are created and lived out by people. That is, these structures are not abstractions or entities that can be identified, recognised or understood independently of the people whom they 'structure', or indeed of the people who 'structure the structures'. Therefore, the notion of processes has been added to the conceptualisation of this paper, to capture this human dimension. These ideas have their roots in the work of the social theorist Anthony Giddens, especially in his work on structuration theory (see Giddens, 1984). Evans and Nation have discussed the importance of Giddens's earlier work for theorising open and distance education (Evans & Nation, 1992, p.8):

¹ The project is funded from 1999 to 2001. Terry Evans is the Chief Investigator and Karen Tregenza is the Research Associate. Dr Richard Guy of the PNG National Research Institute and Prof Olugbemiro Jegede of the Open University of Hong Kong are Associate Investigators on this project.

Giddens's work is concerned with theorising the processes through which social structures are constructed and reconstructed. Social structures are the web of meanings, understandings, values and beliefs which we learn, make and, to some extent share, and which hold us together as families, groups, organisations, corporations or nations. Distance education and open learning institutions are social systems within which social structures shape a variety of social practices, often with an educational purpose, take place. These structures are built and embodied by the people who constitute them and in the case of distance education this includes a highly distributed membership in the form of the student body, regional tutors etc.

Evans has also used a body of work connected to Giddens which theorises time, place and identity in contemporary societies to theorise aspects of distance education (see Evans, 1989, 1995a, 1995b). This work is important for understanding some of the issues connected to off-shore educational provision, especially where matters of localisation and cultural 'invasion' are concerned. More recently Evans and Nation (2000) have drawn on Giddens's recent work concerning the renewal of social democracy to discuss the place of education in national development, again a matter which is of relevance to off-shore education, whether in the so-called developed or developing worlds.

Internationalisation of Australian higher education

Australia has a relatively small population and economy in international terms, but has relatively greater geo-political significance than might be expected. Education is a very important element of both Australia's economy and its political significance, especially in South-east Asia (Rizvi, 1996) and the South Pacific (Thaman, 1997; Wah, 1997) regions. The 'exporting' of education has been greatly assisted, especially in the past decade or so, by Australia's long standing distance education capacity. Additionally, the new computer and communications technologies that are facilitating the globalisation of economic, social, political and cultural life are also enhancing the capacity and potential of Australian education to teach internationally, even globally (Cunningham, et al, 1997).

A dilemma arises when distance education institutions 'export' into the global 'market'. Whilst they may enhance the knowledge and skills of the recipient nation, they risk doing so at the expense of the development of indigenous institutions' capacities to provide local, organically-derived knowledge and skills: a dilemma Evans (1997) has described as access versus invasion. There are concerns from people in developing nations (Thaman, 1997; Wah, 1997), such as those of the Pacific Islands, that 'imported' education will lead to the (further) destruction of local languages and cultures, and contribute to (further) cultural and economic dependency. Guy is sceptical of the worth of imported educational programs and policies, and he argues that indigenous educational practices should prevail (Guy, 1994). Certainly, 'non-state actors such as transnational corporations' (Pettman, 1996, p. 23) or 'foreign' educational providers have much greater roles to play within various nation-states than previously (Edwards, 1994; Henry, et al, 1997).

Such 'foreign' educational providers include those distance education institutions that see the conditions and means of globalisation as being advantageous for their activities, principally in terms of 'marketing' their products and deriving foreign earnings. Often the proponents at the management level underpin their activities with the arguments and values of economic rationalism, whereby the worth of individuals, products and services is determined by their economic value in the (increasingly global) marketplace (see Henry, et al, 1997; Marginson, 1997). However, it is also common to see that internationalist social and cultural values also underpin the activities of those who pursue overseas contracts to provide courses.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project that informs this paper is currently in its third year and deals partly with some of the issues raised above. It is particularly concerned to understand how successful partnerships are established and what the issues and consequences are for those involved. It consists of nine case-studies of post-secondary distance education courses offered through collaboration between Australian institutions with partners in Hong Kong (a Special Administrative Region of China with a strong

British legacy in its higher education systems) or Papua New Guinea (PNG as it is often known, a developing nation with a strong Australian legacy in its higher education system). These two nations represent the 'aid' and 'trade' imperatives in educational collaboration. For PNG, educational partnerships with Australia are about nation-building and are often supported by Australian aid funds and/or draw upon Australian institutions' commitments to aiding developing nations. In the case of Hong Kong, where education is a highly valued commodity, the concern is to participate more as part of Australia's export trading, and to provide courses which are internationally competitive in their price and quality.

Most of the case-studies concern partnerships to provide multiple courses that form part of an articulated sequence, typically from Bachelors through to Masters levels. A range of discipline areas is covered, although they all have a professional connection; it is virtually impossible to find off-shore courses without such a connection. Each institution involved is studied using typical case-study methods including analysis of public and private documents, interviews with key people, observations of meetings, classes and other events, and analyses of internal policy, publicity and teaching materials. The research is conducted on the basis that no participating institutions or persons will be identified in any research publication without their prior written permission. Such permission has not been sought, hence, neither the names of participants nor their institutions are revealed in this paper.

CREATING NEW EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

In many respects, the development of a successful international partnership for providing an Australian course off-shore is the product of a complex interplay of government and institutional policy, faculty and departmental needs and capacities, and personal qualities and skills. Establishing appropriate structures and systems to scrutinise aspects of teaching and learning to enable a course to be marketed, administered, taught, supported, assessed and evaluated requires a level of investment in time, resources and patience which not all are prepared to make. Here we identify and discuss three aspects of the development of such structures, together with the related processes, that were encountered by those in the case-studies.

Marketing, enrolment and administrative structures and processes

It may be argued that all Australian universities have well-honed enrolment and administrative structures, some of which extend back to the 19th century. These structures are sometimes seen as being somewhat inflexible, not just for overseas partnerships, but also for local students. The requirements of government bureaucracy also limit flexibility. However, universities' marketing structures are more recent, due to the advent of mass higher education and the consequent increased numbers of institutions bringing greater competition for school leavers, fee-paying postgraduates and research students.

In PNG such structures are less well-established in the nation's universities. Although some universities (or their antecedent institutions) have been operating for decades, often with procedures established as a result of Australian colonial (pre-1975) or aid assistance, the severe financial circumstances faced by all of PNG's public universities leave their administrative structures decaying or underdeveloped. In recent years, non-government post-secondary educational providers have become established, particularly in the business and information technology areas. Again, their administrative structures are nascent, although they have certain advantages in being able to operate with less direct accountability to government bureaucracies.

Hong Kong higher education has generally well-established structures that are sometimes seen as cumbersome and bureaucratic British remnants. In most cases, Hong Kong universities develop their partnerships with overseas institutions (Australian and British institutions dominate) through a separate department or school structure which has a specific extra-mural and continuing education role. These structures typically have greater autonomy than other departments to 'do business' and often have strong marketing, enrolment and administrative structures to identify, secure and service their 'clients'.

The Australian institutions we studied had to deal within one of these two different sets of marketing, enrolment and administrative structural conditions. Generally, operating within PNG, the institutions took a more relaxed view of what they expected, but they were more prescriptive about what they required. Operating in Hong Kong they expected to operate within an established set of structures for the marketing, enrolment and administration of overseas courses, although these would normally be sufficiently flexible to accommodate their particular requirements.

In our case-studies, for a typical inter-institutional arrangement in PNG, especially with a non-government institution, the marketing and administration processes were relatively simple. Typically, the period from initial approach to marketing and enrolling students was between one year and eighteen months. However, where Australian government aid agencies were involved the time could be extended greatly. This was typically due, not just to the normal requirements of government departments in terms of bureaucratic procedures, but also to the complexities of aid funding and its distribution, that often involve both donor and recipient governments. There are government requirements to register overseas courses offered in PNG, however, it appears that this is a relatively benign process and is not stringently monitored.

Marketing in PNG is in one sense simpler than in Hong Kong. There is very little competition for courses and it is more a matter of creating a market, rather than bidding for market share. In the business and IT areas, there is a demand for courses that can be turned into enquiries and enrolments through newspaper advertising (and articles on new courses) and radio promotions. In the professional upgrading areas, the marketing is usually done through professional associations or employers.

Establishing a course in Hong Kong may take some years, especially as, since 1997, the Hong Kong Government has controlled all 'non-local' courses offered through a special government ordinance. This requires non-local courses to be registered and pay a fee unless they are declared exempt by reason of being offered through a Hong Kong university. Adherence to the ordinance is monitored, although evaluations are not as regular or stringent as some intended. In one case-study, the initial approach to an institution was made in 1994 by an Australian senior academic who was endeavouring to 'sell' a professional course after six years of visits to the appropriate professional and government bodies in Hong Kong. The proposed new course was in an area of emerging professional need that had become established in Australia (and elsewhere) over the preceding decade. However, a senior member of the Hong Kong institution did not appreciate this emerging need and so the proposal lapsed. In 1995 another approach was made to a different person within the same institution and this was met with more enthusiasm. It took another two years to reach agreement to offer the course and to market it in Hong Kong. The Australian academic became frustrated with the 'absurd bureaucracy' at the institution, and the lack of support to market and administer the course. The course never became truly viable, although it has continued to be offered.

A key problem for such partnerships is the need to mesh two institutions' structures in order for the course to be marketed and administered efficiently. Our research showed that where people were following on a previously well-established collaboration between their institutions, it was much easier to tailor the previous arrangements to suit the new course. However, establishing the first structures can be a very slow process that requires good will and a shared purpose between the parties. In another of our cases, an Australian academic observed that in the early 1990s the university mismanaged the early Hong Kong marketing, enrolments and graduations, due to administrative inefficiencies and 'greedy managers...who were after as many students as possible to make maximum profits'.

Teaching structures and processes

Teaching structures and processes in the provision of off-shore programs can be viewed on a scale where there is limited or no face-to-face teaching with either the Australian or overseas institution, through to regular face-to-face contact (weekly or fortnightly) with a local tutor and also with one or two teaching visits per semester by a member of staff from Australia. It is typical of Australian distance education institutions to develop teaching structures and the associated teaching processes which are different from those they used with their Australian students. Particularly, many such institutions teach their Australian students entirely by distance means, whereas in Hong Kong or

PNG they provide face-to-face tuition in addition to the normal (or sometimes modified) course materials.

There are several reasons for developing these different teaching structures. Generally, off-shore students feel assured by the presence of staff from the overseas institution. It was common for new students, especially those who were the first students on a newly offered course, to be impressed by the 'visiting professor' or similar senior person. Students had often not heard of the Australian university before they saw an advertisement for the course, and so a visit from a senior staff member (often bringing tangible symbols, such as, the university newspaper, brochures or mementos) was looked on favourably. However, commonly this visiting senior staff member was not going to be involved in the regular teaching and assessment of the units. Therefore, as the students became more experienced on the course they were more likely to value a visit from the course co-ordinator and teachers on the course, even if they were relatively junior staff. In one case, a course co-ordinator was reluctant to make a visit to PNG even though the head of department had made a few visits. This was viewed negatively by the local staff and students, and contributed to some continuing frustrations over both teaching and administrative matters.

Building face-to-face provision into off-shore Australian distance education is also necessitated by students' learning from a course that is foreign in terms of language and culture. Culture here includes not only contextual differences, but also differences in people's understanding of knowledge and its ownership, and also of teaching and learning processes, which typically exclude notions of learning at a distance. Face-to-face learning is arguably a globally understood phenomenon deeply ingrained since early schooling. It is potentially responsive and interactive to the immediate concerns and questions raised by learners. It helps them understand the ways they will need to learn on their course and how they will be assessed, and how to perform for assessment. As one experienced off-shore educator described it, 'You have to teach the rules of the game before they can play the game'.

In this sense, the face-to-face provision is not just about teaching the subject material, although this is often an important component. Indeed, the students typically have study guides, textbooks and online access to further resources. Rather it is about structuring the induction of the students into a new learning culture and helping to support them through their learning. In preparing Hong Kong students for study in an Australian course, a local tutor asserted during an induction seminar, '...you are learning within the Australian system. So you get some Australian experience. Don't be afraid of that.'

Assessment structures and processes

The assessment structures and related processes vary depending on the requirements and nature of the particular course being offered. Some assignments are marked entirely by local tutors, while others are marked by a combination of both Australian and off-shore staff. Sometimes samples of student assignments from partner institutions in PNG or Hong Kong are assessed in Australia to monitor local tutors' marking processes and to verify the students' standards. A Head of School expressed initial concern regarding the integrity of the exam and assignment processes overseas, fearing that the local tutors would be keen to ensure good pass-rates. However, a monitoring process showed comparable standards and pass-rates, and in some instances the local tutors' marking was considered tougher than that of their Australian counterparts.

The physical conditions under which students are assessed may differ considerably between the PNG and Hong Kong students. A graduate, and subsequent teacher of an Australian course offered in PNG, told the story of undertaking an examination where the power went out. This put the room in total darkness as there were no windows nor was there a generator. The supervisor opened the door for the students to exit and lie on the concrete outside to complete their exam. While this story of running an exam under such conditions is met with horror by his Australian colleagues, this teacher concedes in PNG, '...you have to. It's just the way it is.'

As mentioned earlier, a dilemma arises when institutions export courses into other countries, sometimes at the expense of locally derived knowledge and skills. Such concerns can be highlighted in the assessment structures and processes embodied in courses designed and developed outside of the country in which they are to be run. Indeed, a course developer commented that problems had arisen in the internationalisation of a particular program being offered in PNG as many case-studies referred to in the course materials were ‘...too Australian specific’. This issue was being addressed with assessment items being modified to a more international flavour and questions being answerable for students in no matter which country they might be. Another course offered in PNG attracted some criticism from students and teachers alike where the examination for a particular unit related to the Australian grape and wine industries. Understandably, the PNG students knew little of the case-specific terminology and could not see any relevance or benefit in the study or subsequent assessment of this area.

Plagiarism is an issue raised by some teachers (particularly in relation to those students studying in Hong Kong) that demanded consideration in the assessment process. Plagiarism was often explained in terms of its being a cultural issue – not so much as ‘stealing’ another’s work, but as a ‘...form of respect for the author’s words and argument’. To this end, rather than trying to mould a response from the students, many teachers employ assessment strategies and frameworks where the students are required to draw on their own experiences. Often the set assignments are about aspects specific to the students’ own work contexts and not necessarily something that can be copied from a book. A teacher in an online course also encourages students to recognise local resources and references in assignments to help avoid plagiarism. Where appropriate, these citations are checked and, if suitable, incorporated in the program for the next group to help ‘localise’ and enhance the course.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Australia’s long history of experience of distance education is an important legacy upon which to build the provision of distance education for off-shore, in-country courses. Vying for overseas in-country students can be very competitive and is likely to become even more so, especially in those nations where the demand is high, such as Hong Kong. In this paper we have drawn on the experiences of some Australian providers and their off-shore partners to highlight the educational structures and related processes they encountered in marketing, administering, delivering and assessing their Australian courses off-shore. Our research shows that these are key elements in the development and maintenance of successful international partnerships for providing courses off-shore. Usually considerable time and effort is required to build appropriate structures and processes, which themselves rely heavily on the efforts and dedication of people in the partner institutions. These can be seen as necessary investments for mutually beneficial collaborations.

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