CASE STUDY NO. 7

A CASE OF A COMMUNICATION SKILLS COURSE AT AN OFFSHORE CAMPUS IN MALAYSIA

1. Overview of the partnership

This university and the Malaysian institution which were the focus of the previous case study are also the focus of this case study. To reiterate, the university is the largest provider of international education, and has the greatest share of offshore student enrolments, in its home state. Its partner institution is a purpose-built offshore campus of the Australian university. The campus, located in Malaysia, functions as a division of the university. It delivers programmes offered by three faculties of the Australian university: Humanities, Health Sciences, and the Business School. This case study concerns the suite of units that comprise the communication skills course offered by the Faculty of Humanities.

The communication skills course, whilst not strictly a programme in its own right, comprises a suite of units at first-year level that are tailored to meet the needs of schools and faculties at their request. At the offshore campus, communications skills are taught as components of broader ‘content-based’ units within the course structures for the Bachelor of Science (Applied Geology) and the Bachelor of Engineering.

The units and communication skill’s components are identical to those delivered for the same Bachelor programmes at the Australian university’s main campus. They are ‘owned’ by the Australian university, moderated by Australian university staff, and delivered by academic staff located at the offshore campus. As with all programmes at the offshore campus, the units are taught wholly in English. According to the campus website, every programme is ‘identical’ to the same programme delivered at the University’s central Australian campus.

2. The communication skills course

Graduates of the Bachelor of Science (Applied Geology) degree are eligible for membership of the Geological Society of Australia and the Australian Institute of Geoscientists. The Bachelor of Engineering degree is a professional qualification recognised by the Institution of Engineers Australia (IEA) and the Board of Engineers Malaysia.

The communication skills components of geology and engineering ‘content-based’ units are designed to introduce students to skills required to conduct research in their respective discipline areas, and to make written and oral presentations within their academic and professional contexts. These components also aim to help students think critically within the context of their chosen discipline, and to develop lifelong learning practices they will need to succeed in their profession.
Learning outcomes for communication skills the geology programme include the following:

1. Access, evaluate and synthesis information in the sciences, mathematical sciences or computer sciences for research purposes
2. Demonstrate appropriate academic communication skills, written and oral
3. Demonstrate critical, logical and reflective thinking skills appropriate to university study
4. Articulate an understanding of the practices that will lead you to be a successful and professional in your disciple

Learning outcomes for communication skills the engineering programme include the following:

1. Demonstrate critical, logical and reflective skills appropriate to university study.
2. Demonstrate improvement in communication skills, written and oral, with a particular focus on using clear, concise language appropriate to engineering.
3. Research and produce formal engineering style reports demonstrating control of appropriate conventions and incorporating the appropriate referencing system.
4. Work collaboratively with others and articulate practices that lead to successful teamwork especially in a multicultural context.

3. Positive aspects of the relationship

Welfare

Communication between onshore and offshore academics
Good communication between onshore and offshore academics was considered essential to the welfare of all, and a very positive aspect of the partnership. The offshore academics agreed that they have very good relationships with their onshore counterparts. Several offshore lecturers receive weekly emails from the onshore unit coordinators about teaching plans, unit outlines and general information pertaining to weekly topics and activities. Others have less frequent contact, particularly those who have taught their units for several years, and are generally happy with this level of contact, as they regard this as an acknowledgement of their professionalism and expertise. The constant and regular consultation between onshore and offshore staff is especially appreciated by those located offshore, as it reassures them that they are “on the right track”. A fairly typical communication procedure employed by onshore coordinators was to send a “week-by-week teaching package” to those tutors delivering the unit offshore. An offshore lecturer stated that she received “crucial” emails from the onshore coordinator about such things as unit outlines (usually four weeks ahead of the commencement of semester) and teaching plans (more frequently at the beginning of semester).

Professional development
Professional development of academic staff at both campuses contributes to the quality of the partnership. The university has developed a web-based individual learning programme on internationalising the curriculum. The programme enables staff to identify and locate relevant internationalisation policies and procedures, access
information necessary for planning and/or teaching an internationalised curriculum, and select or locate other sources of information and resources relevant to internationalisation of the curriculum. The self-paced programme aims to meet the diverse needs of staff involved in offshore teaching and learning by offering the choice of a number of different learning modules. Topics include the following:

1. establishing, controlling and monitoring offshore programmes;
2. coordinating units with local and offshore locations;
3. teaching offshore students; and
4. managing or teaching programmes offshore.

**Staffing**

Hiring and firing of staff at the offshore campus is the responsibility of the Dean of Studies, whose broader duties involve “looking after staff, student quality and input into programmes”. Only local Malaysian applicants are interviewed face-to-face. International applicants typically are interviewed by teleconferencing. When staff are employed they have a probation period of six months.

Lecturers who teach the communications skill’s units are mostly located in the recently established Learning Centre, the department responsible for the delivery of the communication skill’s units and components. The Learning Centre provides academic guidance and support for students, enabling them to develop academic skills whilst studying in their enrolled programme. The Dean has a central role in the Learning Centre; offshore staff see this as a positive aspect of the programme, in that the Dean has a sound understanding of the particular nature of their units and teaching roles.

**Curriculum**

**Equivalence of units**

Academics at the onshore and offshore campuses share the view that the quality of the units delivered at both sites is ‘similar’. The unit outlines, topics and learning outcomes are the same, and the lecturers at both sites believe that they know what is ‘expected’ of them to ensure similarity. Additional content is included in the offshore units when it is thought that this will assist student learning. Such content is made available to students at both campuses. Academics at the offshore campus may adapt content to suit local conditions, but believe that the quality is the same. One such academic pointed out that this approach was a satisfactory way to address cultural differences, as well a good way to ‘internationalise’ the curriculum.

Academics onshore and offshore agreed that the question of whether offshore units should be ‘identical’ or ‘equivalent’ to the onshore versions was a key issue. The general view was that the units should be equivalent rather than identical, as the latter could not actually be achieved. It was more realistic to aim for equivalence. One offshore academic explained that, even if teaching the same unit to three different groups at the same campus, the curriculum and delivery would not be identical. However, the course would be at the same level, with the same goals and outcomes.
Preparation of teaching materials
The offshore academics have “a fair degree” of autonomy in the preparation of teaching materials, including readings, PowerPoint slides and classroom handouts. For example, one experienced lecturer described an activity in which students develop a ‘site visit report’ for a water treatment plant. She explained the necessity for the report to be culturally and contextually significant, and the associated need for lecturers to address the competencies required as the need arises. To this end, she provided students with “real life” examples of company diaries, action plans and planning memos to illustrate professional communication protocols. It was generally agreed that the autonomy afforded the lecturers with regard to the preparation, selection and use of teaching materials contributes to the quality of the curriculum.

Work experience
The Bachelor of Engineering requires students to complete at least 12 weeks of work experience prior to graduation. The work experience complements the theoretical aspects of the programme to make it more “meaningful”. Most work experience is undertaken with a large international company, where all communication is conducted in English. The offshore academics agree that their students are well prepared both in terms of professional and English language skills for the work experience component of their studies. They take the view that the quality of the communication skills-units is central to the success of the work experience component of the overall quality of the degree course.

Moderation
Unlike most other programmes delivered at the offshore campus, the assessments for the communication skills-units are not moderated by onshore staff. The onshore coordinators explained that moderation is unnecessary because of the “regular” flow of work samples between the offshore lecturers and tutors and their onshore counterparts. Interestingly, there is moderation of the onshore units, but no such moderation at the offshore campus.

Pedagogy
Expertise of teaching staff
The academics who teach the communication skills-units in the offshore programmes have expertise in communication, English language and cultural issues, along with competence in the discipline area of the programme. This particular expertise is considered to be a strength of the programme. One communications skills’ lecturer who was involved in teaching units offered by the Learning Centre was “co-opted” into the geology communications skills course because his first degree was in geology. However, according to this lecturer:

The unit does not have geology content. We don’t need the background, it’s the comm skills that matter. It’s the capacity to write reports and have research skills which can be imparted to students. Topics are relating to geology, but can be managed to make it meaningful to students.

Onshore academic staff involved in programme and unit coordination stated that they have only recently been involved in decisions concerning which offshore staff would teach particular units, and that this was a “change for the better”. One onshore unit
coordinator explained why it was important for her to have a say in the selection of staff, both onshore and offshore, to teach in particular units: “language processes differ across content-based subjects, and you have to have the expertise to make an impact”.

**Teamwork**

Teamwork is regarded as important by lecturers at the offshore campus. Weekly meetings are held for communication skills’ lecturers across disciplines to discuss lesson topics, workshop activities, assessment tasks, and other pedagogical issues that may arise. The lecturers often receive requests from other academics at the campus, across all discipline areas, to provide additional instruction in communication for final year students, including those studying at Honours level. One lecturer explained the group’s particular approach to teamwork as “doing things in a different way”. They are transparent about their teaching methods and outcomes, keeping material such as company diaries, industrial policies and workshop activities to share amongst staff.

**Assessment**

The communication skills’ units are assignment-based, with no examinations. Assignments include writing case study reports, giving oral presentations, producing learning portfolios, and keeping weekly diaries or reading logs. One lecturer stated that the following assignment, as described in the unit outline for an engineering communication skills component, is “typical” of communication skill’s assessment tasks:

The aim of this assignment is to practice research and report writing skills. The skills students develop in this task will be valuable for all the reports they will write as student engineers and beyond in their professions. The report is based on the 1st site visit. It cannot simply be a description of the site or its facilities but rather an analysis of a problem or issue associated with the site leading to a few practical recommendations for an appropriate audience such as your head of department or chief executive officer of the organization … A good report is based on good research. However, this report is based on an actual site visit. The core of the research is the site, the company you will be visiting.

Because the students of the programmes are mainly non-English speakers, the lecturers give numerous ‘small tasks’ to increase student competency. They also provide ‘models’ of assessment outcomes, such as sample reports, which the students find useful. These practical examples make assessment more meaningful to students. The teaching staff regard these ‘safeguards’ as beneficial to the overall quality of teaching and learning.

**Promoting learning**

The following were identified by onshore programme coordinators as important ways of promoting learning in the communication skills units:

- students should be able to see the unit outline
- ESL students with language problems are identified and assisted. Their competence can, perhaps, be determined by formal examination in which the minimum standard must be achieved
Units are prescriptive because of the large number of tutors employed – usually there are four or five sub-topics delivered through workshops, rather than lectures, in each unit.

Textbooks have been written to mirror the structure of the unit.

All units have similar emphases.

There is an emphasis on keeping the standard up to the onshore level.

### 4. An outline of ‘issues’ in the relationship

#### Welfare

**Staff involvement**

Involvement in offshore programmes is a requirement of onshore staff. Coordinators of units delivered at the offshore campus are expected to provide support to the offshore staff members with regard to all aspects of curriculum design and delivery, including assessment. Programme coordinators at the main campus stated that they are given neither “money nor time” to assist with the extra workload. Many onshore academics keep in touch with their offshore counterparts at least weekly, providing lecture material and responding to email queries. While this level of communication is considered important by the majority of onshore academics, it is also regarded by some as an additional workload burden, and by one as an “unwelcome imposition”. According to one onshore unit coordinator:

> I received an email from the man teaching the unit (at the offshore campus) asking what I would like him to do. I have no idea. I suppose we will have to find out together.

#### Professional development

The web-based professional development programme that is available to both onshore and offshore staff members is designed for onshore academics involved in offshore activities. As a result there is a heavily reliance by the offshore staff members on the expertise and, in some cases, the ‘goodwill’ of the onshore unit coordinators for induction and professional development in the delivery of the units.

Offshore lecturers agreed that they would like to have course inductions: “This would help us to clarify issues which are of concern to us and our students too.” They would like to know “what is happening” at the main campus in Australia. Email contact is considered to be valuable, but not sufficient. The lecturers consider it unlikely that they will be able to visit main campus, due to budget constraints. Similarly, onshore unit coordinators indicated the desire to visit the offshore campus to get a sense of the cultural context of the curriculum. Only two of the four onshore unit coordinators interviewed had visited the offshore campus, once in each case. As one of these coordinators explained: “Unless I go up and get involved, I have no clear idea what happens in the classroom there ... it’s the blind leading the blind.”
Curriculum

Ownership’ of the units
Onshore academics who coordinate and teach units within the communication skills’ programme described the organisation and control of the units as having a complex political history. Units originally designed and owned by the communication skills’ team had been ‘taken over’ by other programme areas. One unit designed for delivery at the home campus in Australia had been ‘taken’ to the offshore campus with no further consultation with the onshore academics. Most onshore staff were unaware of a Learning Centre having been established at the offshore campus. The prevailing view was that all staff involved with the delivery of the communication skills’ units onshore and offshore should be consulted about policy changes and restructuring initiatives.

Internationalisation of the curriculum
Offshore teaching staff stated that they would like to expose their students to internationalisation through bringing in further examples of professional practice from a range of international contexts. At present, there is ‘room’ in the curriculum to only bring in additional material from the Malaysian context. This is seen as beneficial, but there is a desire for even greater freedom and autonomy in adapting course content and preparing teaching materials. The lecturers were adamant that internationalising the curriculum as they propose would serve to enhance the quality of the course still further.

Pedagogy

Cultural issues
The majority of the students at the offshore campus are Malaysian. Many of them are of Chinese ethnicity. The remaining students come from more than 40 countries. The students taking the offshore communication skills’ units represent this range of disparate backgrounds. All new campus staff are required to participate in a Foundations of Teaching and Learning programme that addresses teaching with culturally diverse students. However, the communications skills’ lecturers feel that, even though are “better prepared than most” to teach such groups, more cross-cultural pedagogical training would be of great benefit to them. This, in turn, would help them develop cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity in their students.

English language
The low-level of spoken English language proficiency skills of some students taking the communication skills units was of concern to the offshore lecturers. One academic described the following as an ongoing problem: “Often they don’t understand the context, so you don’t get what they really want to say. They can’t express themselves clearly.” The units are mainly workshop-based, and students tended to self-select into workshop groups with students of similar language backgrounds. As a result, they often conducted small group discussions in their first language, rather than in English, which inhibited language skill development.

The general view was that all students were “brought up to speed” in English language over the duration of the course, and noticeably so by the time they engaged in work experience. However, it was strongly suggested that students identified by themselves and other lecturers as having low-level English be encouraged to make use of language support offered by the Learning Centre. It was suggested too that more time be allocated
to communications skills in the degree programmes, and that the course be extended beyond the first year in order to enhance the level of English of all students.

5. Some specific principles arising out of this case study for informing quality assurance frameworks

The following principles emerge out of the case for consideration in the development of a QAF:

1. A sound protocol outlining appropriate means of communication, procedures and amount of contact, should be established.

2. Offshore staff should have autonomy in adapting the curriculum to suit the local context and the culturally diverse backgrounds of students. Teaching materials should reflect the cultural context of the course and provide an international dimension to the curriculum.

3. Units delivered both offshore and onshore should be equivalent, rather than 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.

4. Expectations of onshore staff relating to involvement in offshore activities should be made explicit.

5. Onshore staff involved in the coordination of offshore courses as part of their work should be compensated in workload formulas for their time.

6. Students with low-level English language proficiency skills should be informed about, and encouraged to make use of, language support programmes.

7. Reciprocal visits by onshore and offshore academics to each institution for professional development purposes should be enabled.

8. Professional development and induction programmes for offshore staff, similar to those in place for onshore staff, should be established.