CASE STUDY NO. 6

A CASE OF A MASS COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME AT AN OFFSHORE CAMPUS IN MALAYSIA

1. Overview of the Australian university’s activity

This university is the largest and most multi-cultural in its particular State. It maintains eight campuses, including an inter-state campus and two campuses in South East Asia. Within its home State it also operates seven regional education centres. Claiming a practical and ‘real-world’ orientation to its teaching and research, it employs more than 2,900 academic staff to deliver programmes in Business, Science, Resources, Humanities and Engineering. Across its entire operations, the university provides education to more than 41,000 students. Of Australian universities, it is in the top three in terms of enrolment of international students. It has a stated, substantial and expanding commitment to offshore delivery, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region where it has contractual agreements with more than thirty private and university-based providers. Its offshore delivery approaches include the offshore campus, and variations of twinning, face-to-face and franchise formats.

The department offering the programme that is the focus of this case is located in the Humanities division at the central campus, and maintains the highest number of international enrolments within the division. It has an eight-year history of offshore delivery, operating at four locations, with its major commitment in Malaysia. Its offshore programme delivery is that students are given the opportunity to undertake part of their studies (often the final year) at the main Australian campus. In terms of enrolments, the Department’s primary offshore programme is the Bachelor of Arts (mass communication), was delivered to more than 300 students in total, at three sites in Malaysia and at one site in Mauritius. Interviews were conducted with the Department’s long-serving international coordinator, the coordinator of the mass communication programme and with a coordinator of a film and television unit and a coordinator of a journalism unit (these latter two units serviced the programme).

2. Overview of the offshore institution’s activity

The institution is as an offshore campus of the Australian university, established on invitation from a regional government in Malaysia. The campus was purpose-built for the Australian university in 2002. It has 280 staff, 110 of whom are full-time academics. Approximately 50 per cent of the academic staff is non-Malaysian and approximately the same percentage of academic staff has doctoral qualifications. Approximately 2,400 students studied at the campus for accreditation with the Australian university. Of this student body, approximately 80 per cent are Malaysian citizens, many of Chinese ethnicity. The remainder is non-Malaysian drawn from forty countries.

The campus has departments of Foundation and Continuing Studies, Mass Communication, Business, and Science and Engineering. All programmes delivered at the campus are required to be taught in English. According to the offshore institution’s
website, “every aspect of the academic programs including course materials and examinations delivered” at the Malaysian site “are (sic) identical” to the programmes delivered at the Australian university’s central campus.

The department which is the focus of this case study began operating in 2003, as part of the School of Business, officially attaining separate departmental status in 2006. Its five full-time academics have professional backgrounds, the spread of career experience covering film and television, journalism, commerce, advertising and design. One staff member, the head of department, has a doctorate. The remaining departmental academics hold or are working towards masters degrees.

3. The activity between the institutions

The relationship between the two institutions in respect to the Bachelor of Arts (mass communication) programme is that it is ‘owned’ and moderated by the Australian university and delivered by academic staff from the offshore campus. The programme itself involves the study of the theory, history, ethics, criticism and practice of media, information and new communication technologies. Students can acquire knowledge and develop practical skills in at least two areas of specialisation: Film & Television — Corporate Production; and Marketing or Public Relations. Applicants to the programme are required to meet “the University’s” minimum scholastic (General Certificate of Education ‘0’ level Grade C) and language entry (a minimum IELTS score of 6.0) requirements.

To gain a degree, students are required to complete 24 units (600 credits) consisting of six ‘core’ units, six units as a First Stream, six units as a Second Stream and a further six units that can either be Third Stream or six electives. As mentioned, students have the opportunity to commence their studies at the offshore campus and complete them at the Australian university. At the time this case study was conducted there were 66 students enrolled in the mass communication programme at the offshore campus and a further 22 students undertaking foundation studies at the campus as a preliminary to enrolment in the programme.

4. Positive aspects of the relationship

**Welfare**

The strength of the relationship and the experiences of well-being associated with it can mainly be attributed to strong personal bonds between senior onshore and offshore academics involved with the mass communication programme. These academics believe the programme “worked well” because of the excellent working relationship that in turn was a product of “trust” and “confidence” in counterparts. Senior academics onshore justified their positive assessments of offshore programme delivery through “knowing” their offshore colleagues. The head of the offshore department thought there were “no real problems” with the programme because of the “stability” of the relationship between the participating onshore and offshore academics.

Integral to the orderly running of the programme and to the well-being of staff were well established communication routines. Onshore unit coordinators and offshore
teaching staff ordinarily communicated by email. Issues to do with the international nature of the programme were dealt with through telephone calls between the onshore international coordinator and the offshore department head. Any major issues arising in connection with the teaching of the programme were addressed by telephone communications between the onshore coordinator for the programme and the offshore department head. The etiquette of the communication process was also valuable to programme functioning and staff welfare. Onshore academics provided “advice not interference” according to the offshore department head.

The mode of delivery, that is the offshore campus, also contributed positively to the welfare of academics onshore and offshore. For academics offshore in particular, the campus was testimony that the Australian university was committed to “serving the local community and contributing to the development of this region”. The campus promoted the notion of an onshore/offshore partnership of academics. It signalled the need for cooperation. It promoted the idea of a collegial enterprise and all staff on both sides appreciated this climate. The specific form of programme delivery, whereby students could undertake onshore and offshore study, was viewed as widening the cultural horizons of staff and students.

**Curriculum**

Academics offshore were receptive and respectful, in a very broad sense, of the curriculum (that which at the beginning of each semester was (usually) couriered to them in the form of unit outlines and collated readings). Confidence in the curriculum was encouraged partly by the belief that the programme was needed locally, that the curriculum was a response to a “legitimate demand”. However, ‘due regard’ was largely afforded to the curriculum, because senior departmental academics offshore ‘knew’ their onshore counterparts and trusted their professional expertise.

Onshore and offshore there was a strong belief that curriculum had to be fitted to context. Exemplifying the view, the onshore international coordinator commented: “The first question we always have with a unit or programme we want to run overseas is — how transferable is it?” The head of the offshore department commented: “We know what students expect and how to adapt courses to local environments”. An offshore lecturer remarked: “Unit versions must fit with context. One size for all doesn’t work.” The idea of a professional partnership established the possibility for curriculum negotiation. It was enabled because the dialogic norm was collegial and supportive.

“We take cultural sensibilities very seriously”, said the onshore international coordinator explaining the need for offshore unit adaptation. The coordinator of the film and television unit commented in similar vein:

It is really important for coordinators to liaise to determine what is suitable for them (offshore students). I don’t see the point of showing them films that may be offensive to them when others will do. Some films they just don’t get. The lecturer up there (offshore) was concerned with some of our films because much of the cultural content was incomprehensible to the students. He told me that he wanted to change them because students couldn’t discuss them because they didn’t get what they were about. He replaced them and made excellent choices.
A lecturer offshore justified adaptations to work assignments in this way: “Why should film production all be in English when the characters speak Chinese? I tell the students to put the subtitles in English. That is okay.” Assignments were also commonly adapted to suit ‘local environments’ and student background. The lecturer responsible for the journalism unit commented that “it is just not possible to write a generic journalism exam”. Instead, the draft examination paper was sent to the offshore campus for comment. The final examination paper produced was, in the coordinator’s words, “a reflection of that negotiation”.

A successful approach to introducing new curriculum was another positive aspect of the relationship. Consultation and negotiation were again important to this process. “If they couldn’t run an extra unit or units without losing quality then we wouldn’t insist”, observed the onshore international coordinator. The standard practice when adding or replacing units was to provide the offshore department with “advance notification”, which involved passing on the new materials “six months early, so they can understand the new curriculum and organise the right staff”. The precaution was also taken of “bedding down” new units onshore for a semester, before they were offered, for review, to the offshore department. For the offshore department head, the process of curriculum innovation was efficient because of “lead-in time and the right to make changes to suit local needs”.

For evaluation of the merit of unit adaptations and innovations, the final arbiter, with universal agreement, was student achievement of learning outcomes. Essentially, academics offshore could be flexible in their use of content and alter the curriculum in formal and informal ways, for example by substituting a reading or changing a project topic or an assessment, as long as the substitution was oriented towards the learning outcomes agenda identified in the relevant unit outline. Similarly, offshore academics were able to make a case for substitution to their onshore counterparts, by arguing that a task or text was not meeting identified learning needs or that some other task or text would achieve the result more effectively. Onshore staff reported drawing on the ideas of offshore staff to alter the onshore curriculum of their units to make learning activities for their domestic students more finely honed to learning outcomes.

**Pedagogy**

The two most senior academics working in the offshore programme had attained their educational qualifications from Australian universities and had taught on campuses in Australia. They both believed their experience was critical to producing pedagogical approaches consistent with onshore practices and also for “bridging” the teaching challenges thrown up by working at the offshore campus. Onshore academics took the same view. With strong support from onshore, the two senior academics employed what they described as “team teaching” in the programme with less experienced colleagues. In their description of purpose and roles it became apparent that they were modelling teaching practices. The junior staff confirmed this, and spoke very appreciatively of the effect of this form of mentoring on their practice.

As mentioned, there was a long-standing close working relationship between the two departments and the nature of the interaction was determinedly collegial. All academics onshore reported that they had discussed teaching strategies with offshore counterparts. Explaining the attitude within the onshore department, the onshore film and television lecturer stated: “With them it’s not ‘what can we get out of you?’ It’s sharing. They’re
motivated by the same thing we are, educational goals and not just business interests.” All participants agreed that the most effective ‘sharing’ was generated through personal contact between onshore and offshore staff. Teaching visits to the offshore campus were highly regarded as opportunities not only to share teaching strategies, but to (further) align offshore teaching practices with onshore teaching practices. Onshore staff said that they regarded personal contact as so critical to teaching the programme that they always tried to take any opportunities available, for example, study leave or a moderation visit to another provider in Malaysia, to go to the offshore campus to personally meet with their counterparts. This fundamental understanding of the importance of the teaching visit and personal contact is exemplified in remarks from the onshore coordinator of the film and television unit:

Being able to visit is really important. The longer a staff member is up there, the less moderation you need to do. Getting to know staff up there, sitting down and talking with them about what you’re aiming for, is the most valuable thing you’re doing. The more time you spend up there it improves quality. What I love is when you get a chance to sit down for an hour or two and talk about one assignment or one session, then you go back and see the results. Or when you can sit down in a class where everybody watches a film, sits down and talks about. If you can be there when they’re teaching, then you can understand what they’re doing, how they’re thinking.

The arrangement in relation to moderation was that once assignments in a unit had been completed by students, they were assessed by the relevant academic offshore and given provisional marks or grades. Either all of the assignments or selections covering the marking range were then immediately couriered to the onshore unit coordinator. This party examined all aspects of the assessment process, possibly ‘corrected’ marks to fit onshore marking expectations, and provided feedback. Moderation was regarded as an aid to pedagogy. “Moderation”, said a junior lecturer offshore, “is where I find out if I’m doing things right”.

5. Issues and problems in the relationship

Welfare
The mass communication programme was described as a small programme, and as such it reportedly produced only a “small profit”. In terms of resources, the offshore programme struggled to match its onshore counterpart and this created difficulties in the relationship. Senior academics offshore also had to struggle to win budget outlays, placing stress on their relationships with management. A small profit also meant that moderation was conducted onshore, rather than through visits to the offshore campus. Staff visits and staff exchanges were also constrained.

The programme was structured so that students could divide their studies between the offshore and onshore campus. Students who took up this offer typically opted to take the first two years of study offshore and the final undergraduate year onshore. There were financial benefits for the Australian university in students opting for an onshore segment of study. The international coordinator remarked: “We want to attract our partner’s students to us, they want to retain them”. The institutional objectives were
therefore at odds and the competition for students was recognized as a contradiction to the spirit of collaboration.

Entitlement issues arose for offshore staff. Working at an offshore campus of an Australian university, they believed their conditions should reflect employment within the university. They complained of lower pay scales than for ‘equivalent’ employment at the home or central campus of the Australian university. They also advised that relative to their ‘colleagues’ onshore, they received less protection against termination of employment and less access to and/or financial support for various forms of leave including conference leave. They noted that staff seconded from the onshore to the offshore campus retained the benefits from their employment at the onshore campus.

The argument for parity could be taken to be disingenuous, since the academics had all been ‘hired’ by the provider in Malaysia and not by the Australian university. That is, they had been employed ‘locally’ to work at the campus of an Australian university. However, it was verified that they were identified as academics of the Australian university, on official websites. Furthermore, the aggrieved pointed out that employment at the campus required approval from the Australian university, and that they were teaching the University’s programme to students enrolled as students of the Australian university. Senior academics wryly observed that academics who were seconded to the campus from the Australian university continued to receive the higher entitlements. From the viewpoint of the offshore academics, their somewhat uncertain status and very definitely inferior entitlements were difficult to reconcile with a ‘partnership’ of equals. The offshore department head also noted that “it is increasingly difficult to attract or keep good staff because salaries are lower here”. This comment is of relevance because all participants saw stability in staff employment as vital to the programme’s continued well-being.

The issue of role allocation particularly affected onshore academics. The academics complained of not receiving any forewarning that they were expected to serve as coordinators of units delivered at the offshore campus (and at other offshore venues). In the words of one lecturer:

You get an email from somewhere and someone you didn’t know existed. This person says ‘hello, good to be working with you, please send me your unit material’. And that’s how you suddenly find yourself coordinating an offshore unit. Nobody comes and tells you this. When you go for the job here, it’s not mentioned.

Even the academics who had sustained long-term stable relationships with offshore counterparts looked back on the unexpected email from offshore as the first intimation that they were responsible for offshore coordination. There was an emphatic view (onshore and offshore) that first contact by email was unsatisfactory.

Another major issue relating to unanticipated role allocation was that onshore academics viewed their offshore coordination as competing with their onshore coordination, largely because offshore coordination was perceived as additional workload. As one lecturer remarked: “taking on new unit coordination unexpectedly means you are stretched”. Offshore coordination created the dilemma of where to direct time and energy. All the onshore academics prioritised the coordination roles, and all
saw their first responsibility as being to their onshore units, tutors and students. Explaining the thinking, the international coordinator remarked of his colleagues that “they joined the University to work there!”

**Curriculum**

The international coordinator advised that the contract between the offshore provider and the university required the curriculum offshore to be the same curriculum delivered onshore. In verification, as mentioned earlier, the university websites maintained that programmes delivered at the offshore campus were “identical” to programmes delivered onshore. The international coordinator explained that the mass communication programme offered offshore was “initially determined by what was viable to teach offshore”. Factors of viability included equipment and human resources available at the offshore campus and projected student enrolments in prospective unit offerings. What proved to be viable, according to the international coordinator, was a “reduced version of the programme”.

It will be recalled that the offshore department began as a component of a business school. At its inception then, the programme was not in an area oriented towards the Humanities. From the viewpoint of the international coordinator, there was “never any prospect” that the programme would be identical onshore and offshore. At the time of the study, five years post inception, the programme offered offshore was still more limited in scope than the onshore programme and had a different orientation. The international coordinator maintained that there were advantages for the onshore department in having the more extensive programme, because it was an inducement to students to transfer their studies from offshore to onshore.

Onshore and offshore, it was acknowledged that the contractual obligation to present the same curriculum offshore as onshore could not be met. Practices that challenged contractual requirements included ‘bedding-in’ new units onshore and the negotiation of the curriculum delivered offshore. Offshore lecturers alluded to poor library resources, internet censorship and other restrictions on information that impacted on the curriculum. One offshore lecturer drew attention to a university-required ‘graduate attribute’ of knowledge of Australian indigenous issues. “How and why would we aim for knowledge about Australian Aborigines as a graduate attribute here?” he asked. Senior academics onshore and offshore registered concern over their personal breaches of the contract between the university and the provider, but all advised they could not fully accede to its requirements “without sacrificing quality”.

Academics offshore strongly believed they should be involved from the outset in writing curriculum material for offshore delivery. They remarked on the expectations that they saw established by an onshore/offshore collegial partnership, their professional expertise, their knowledge of local context and their students’ needs, and the “absence” of appropriate cultural content in onshore units. Onshore academics were, in principle, in favour of joint writing. However, they did not see how this could be achieved. The matter of the ‘identical’ curriculum was also raised. Onshore academics regarded curriculum negotiation as an ‘imperfect’ but pragmatic response to the problem of taking curriculum across borders.
Pedagogy

A matter of concern for onshore staff was that they could not “thoroughly screen” offshore teaching appointments to the programme, because there was no opportunity for them to interview applicants in person. In the first place, they said, the funding was not available to support travel by onshore staff to the campus. In the second place, onshore obligations made travel offshore a difficult proposition and finally, even if time and funding were available, candidates were often drawn from countries outside of Malaysia and in these circumstances the selection process was typically conducted through email and perhaps telephone exchanges. “What we get is their recommendations and the applicant’s C.V.”, explained the international coordinator. Onshore objections to a nomination had in the past been met by the response that there was no better candidate available. There was also a concern that if a programme or unit running at the campus lost ‘viability’, then lecturers in that programme or unit might be shifted to teaching units in the mass communication programme that were outside their expertise. This concern was largely based on past experience with offshore coordination.

Offshore and onshore academics strongly believed that teaching visits from onshore staff to the offshore campus were too infrequent. The international coordinator echoed the general view onshore and offshore when he commented: “In order for programmes to function properly, regular teaching visits are needed from those involved”. Academics offshore emphasised the need to initiate teaching visits to the offshore campus for “cross-fertilization” purposes. Junior academics offshore believed that a teaching visit from the relevant onshore coordinator was essential prior to undertaking any teaching in a particular unit. All onshore staff agreed with this view, though there had been no inductions. Staff onshore thought that onshore academics newly appointed to coordinate offshore units would also benefit from inductions.

Teaching visits that did occur were irregular. For example, the mass communication programme coordinator, who was in her fourth year of coordination advised that she had been to the offshore campus once, towards the end of her third (and previous) year of offshore coordination. Often, teaching visits came out of individual staff initiatives. For example, one academic reported a teaching visit during study leave and another mentioned a short visit to the offshore campus during a moderation trip to another campus in Malaysia. Onshore commitments were seen as one barrier to routine visits, a view caught in this comment from the coordinator of the programme: “Just don’t have the time to go anyway. No time in the semester when you want to teach and no time in between to go”. According to the international coordinator, another barrier to regular teaching visits was that the programme “did not make enough money” to enable them. One coordinator alleged that she had heard from the international area of the University that “there was no marketing advantage” in sending academics from the programme to the offshore campus.

All academics agreed that regular teaching visits were needed during teaching periods. Onshore academics illustrated the argument by identifying improvements to pedagogy achieved through such (rare) visits. For example, a lecturer commented, “there’s a real advantage in going up there when they’re teaching. We had a lecturer complaining about student behaviour, answering mobile phones, a lack of respect. When one of our staff managed to go there and observe what was happening, he saw the lecturer didn’t know how to deliver a lecture. So he sat down with him and helped him”. Another said that one of the offshore academics “had no thought that corporate production could be
exciting — had to work with his teaching. Once we twigged his teaching he got it and now he works really well.” One further reason given for holding teaching visits during teaching times was that tutors who were employed on a part-time basis to work in the programme were often unavailable during non-teaching periods. Onshore lecturers also agreed that more teaching visits would be of benefit to their pedagogy, as they could learn from their offshore colleagues. Junior academics offshore thought that routine in-semester teaching visits would ensure their teaching was consistent with expectations onshore and improve pedagogy in the programme generally. One junior academic said: “It is week 8 and I have had no personal contact this semester. I want to share, but where is the opportunity?”

An issue for onshore academics was pressure to supply what they saw as their “intellectual property”, in the form of lecture notes and lectures, for delivery in the programme offshore. This pressure reportedly emanated from offshore staff sending emails asking for lecture material and asking if lectures were available online and from the university’s alleged “push for i-lectures and online delivery”. Junior academics offshore acknowledged wanting to gain access to unit lectures composed onshore and thought that their pedagogy would benefit from access. One senior academic offshore advised that lectures in the programme typically were constructed by staff in the following fashion. The relevant weekly unit readings set for students were examined for their general themes and arguments. Staff then researched these further via the internet. With the framework of the lecture in place, local articulations or illustrations of themes and arguments were found to augment the lectures and provide relevance for students. The offshore academics also reported that they typically doubled the time allocated onshore for tutorials and lectures. This was done to compensate for language problems. According to the lecturers, since most of the students had English as their second or third language, they struggled to comprehend set readings, particularly “the theoretical ones”.

While offshore staff believed that moderation of their marking by onshore unit coordinators was useful for their pedagogy, they thought that the practice risked undermining their standing with their students, and particularly so if there were long delays in receiving back moderated work from the onshore campus or, if there were substantial reductions to the provisional marks they had given out to students. For onshore staff, the main problem with the moderation process was that feedback was not always acted upon, particularly feedback requesting that numerical assessment and general criticisms be supported by specific diagnostic comment. Staff mentioned making the same requests year after year on occasion with little result. Offshore academics argued that there was more value in verbal than written diagnosis for non-native English speakers.

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

1. Programme delivery should be of sufficient financial viability to sustain quality in teaching/learning

2. Communication protocols should be established in advance of programme delivery
3. Teaching/learning should be conducted as a collegial enterprise

4. There should be clear guidelines for curriculum implementation, curriculum adaptation and curriculum renewal

5. Student achievement of learning outcomes should be the arbiter for evaluating the merit and effectiveness of curriculum delivery

6. Teaching visits and teaching exchanges should be routinely implemented

7. The involvement of onshore staff in offshore programme delivery should be on a voluntary basis

8. Staff teaching in transnational programmes should receive formal instruction on roles and responsibilities

9. Processes for the employment of teaching staff offshore should provide for thorough screening for new appointments and for regular staff appraisals

10. There should be clear guidelines for the provision of curriculum material offshore

11. In respect to the assessment of student work, feedback and moderation processes should be monitored for effectiveness