



***The growth of transnational
programmes; distance learning;
different cultures of learning.***

Dave Burnapp

3rd Annual Conference

**Improving International
Student Experience**

Friday 28th January 2011



Background

- 'Transnational education' (TNE) refers to programmes where students remain in their home country whilst following a course provided by a foreign institution or agency.
- This is also known as cross-border education, collaborative provision, or borderless education, and can increasingly involve private and non-academic providers.
- This presentation will briefly point out some of the managerial aspects of TNE, and will then move onto aspects relating to learning and teaching, which is my main concern.



Three key texts are referred to in the first part of this presentation:

- OECD (2005) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border education.*
- Drew et al (2008) *Trans-national Education and Higher Education.*
- QAA (2010) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) – Amplified version October 2010.*



Managerial Aspects

- It is predicted that TNE programmes will soon become one of the largest components of international higher education, Drew et al (2008) found that 65% of UK institutions had TNE programmes in 2007, over 1,500 programmes involving more than 275,000 students, that being 12% of the total number of students in UK HE.



Risk of misunderstanding

- There is a high risk of misunderstanding between partners by loose use of terms like 'validation', or 'joint award' without a clearer and more detailed itemisation of *exactly* what is being proposed. Particularly if negotiations are being conducted with interpreters or agents, or if the parties have existing relationships with other institutions, possibly in a different country with different regulations and using different terminology, and so each side may bring to the discussion different sets of expectations.



Types of programmes where students contract with local partner institutions

- **Validation** programmes which are designed by the partner but following the guidelines of the UK institution, which assures quality and then gives the award.
- **Articulation** a recognition that a programme run by the partner matches a part of the UK institution's programme, allowing students to progress.
- **Franchise** the partner running the UK institution's programme in the same way that it is offered within the UK.



Types of programmes where students contract with local partner institutions

- ***Joint awards*** both institutions contribute parts towards programmes, perhaps students travel between the institutions at different times (or use distance learning facilities), receives a single award issued jointly by the two partners.
- ***Dual awards*** where the student receives a separate award from each of the partner institutions following common assessments.
- ***Partial credit*** can attend modules in a university in another country and to have this count towards a degree in the home university.



Types of programmes where students contract with the UK institution

- ***In-country/flying faculty*** staff from the UK university travel abroad to teach, perhaps in intensive blocks.
- ***Distance learning*** perhaps using e-learning. Another term often used is 'flexible and distributed learning' (FDL).
- ***Blended delivery*** combining features of several of the other models: e.g. a local partner, and flying faculty/ distance learning features.
- ***On-campus provision overseas*** a small number of large universities are developing.



The OECD (2005) guidelines supply an ethical framework relating to TNE:

- “to protect students and other stakeholders from low-quality provision and disreputable providers (p3)”.
- Perhaps a greater threat, though, is a provider who does not intentionally set out to exploit, (those described in the guidelines as ‘rogue providers’) but an institution which slips into low-quality provision through a failure of planning.
- There are three major topic areas which institutions and academic staff need to assess:



Concerning any envisaged partners:

- Checking that the envisaged partners (and/or agents) abide by the government registration/licensing requirements.
- Checking on the quality of the faculty and their working conditions.
- Checking the conduct of any agents involved in establishing or recruiting to the programme.



Concerning the envisaged programme:

- Checking that it is comparable in level and quality with similar programmes offered in the home institution, whilst recognising that local factors (cultural, linguistic, social) need to be considered to ensure relevance.
- Checking that the envisaged programme abides by the quality assurance procedures of both countries.



Concerning the envisaged qualification:

- Checking that the qualification will lead to national and professional recognition, and guidance and information concerning the qualification will be accurate and openly available. Are the students being misled in any way?



- Similarly UK staff should consult their own institutional strategy, to design a programme which will satisfy the different motivations of all partners involved:
 - in the students' home institution: to introduce new disciplines; to enable staff development; to introduce e-learning; or to enable that institution to enhance its reputation.
 - in the UK institution: to assure a flow of students for top-up and Masters courses; to add to both income and diversity of its student population; to enable their own staff to develop cross-cultural skills.



Resources

- Pragmatically it is also necessary to consider the resources and hence costs at an early stage as some forms (for example flying faculty) may be greatly more expensive than others (for example distance learning via a VLE).
- BUT, it should also be recognised that developing distance learning programmes involves far more than mere 'webifying' of existing teaching materials, and this may involve considerable staff development to produce high quality materials.



Quality Assurance procedures

- The first stage can involve an in-depth institutional examination of the envisaged partner, the process of due diligence includes assuring that resources, facilities, staffing, and financial procedures are robust and fit for purpose.
- The second approval stage involves devising and agreeing both the initial validation procedure for the specific programme which is being developed, as well as establishing the ongoing quality assurance processes which will be followed.

QAA (2010) code of practice

- For UK institutions the issues of quality assurance of TNE programmes are largely covered in the QAA (2010) code of practice.
- TNE is not necessarily dependent on e-learning and e-learning is not always about TNE, but both are emerging at the same time and they have often been developed in tandem.
- ‘Depending on the nature of the proposed collaboration, the due diligence enquiries which need to be undertaken will vary’.



Learning and teaching methods

- Much of what has already been outlined relates to policies, procedures, and management, and there is a danger that such deliberations remain at the functional or instrumental level.
- However at a deeper level it must be recognised that different models of collaboration and different modes of delivery will require amendments to the learning and teaching methods some or all of the participants have previously been familiar with.



- Education is about the construction of knowledge, and different cultures of education may not share a common philosophical base. (BUT NOTE: to acknowledge difference is not to imply deficit)
- Ensuring success of transnational education should be seen to involve both staff (and hence requiring staff development) and students, for example by ensuring that they are helped to understand not just the surface-level regulations of the programme but also the deeper-level (and often unstated) assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge.



- Burnapp and Zhao (2010) conducted research with students who studied a TNE programme in China and then continued their education in the UK on final year top-up degrees.
- They identified that although the students were remaining in their home country for the first years of their studies they still needed to negotiate several transitions related to *epistemology*, moving from one culture of learning to the new culture of education of the transnational programme.



“There is no reason to doubt that the students and their teachers in China had genuinely believed they were delivering authentic UK style courses, and similarly there is no reason to doubt whether the correct procedures ... had been followed by the validating agencies and the recruiting universities and their collaborative partners. However the students’ seeming unpreparedness raises the possibility that even strict adherence to these procedures might not assure that – at a level deeper than that covered by managerial guidelines, at a level which relates to what is deemed to be knowledge and how knowledge should be created – a mismatch may occur.”



- The QAA (2010) guidelines point out that: 'It is equally important to ensure that staff involved in the delivery of inter-sectoral or transnational education are fully prepared for, and understand, the cultural assumptions about higher education in the UK, which may differ from the expectations of other sectors or other countries in which they operate' (p45).
- A danger that must be recognised is that we may create programmes and learning activities which really only mimic the intended features of higher education but do not actually replicate that system in its essential features.



- It is essential to do more than supplying students with a brief study skills introduction, and – turning to staff development – where academic staff may need development opportunities to consider the assumptions on which the programme is based.
- A far from simple example of this concerns the need for students to demonstrate critical thinking in their assignments: TNE in all its forms should consider the question of how the requirement of demonstrating critical thinking can be defined, described, modelled, and evidenced in settings where possibly this has not been a requirement in the students' previous experiences.



- It is essential that TNE programmes have activities built into them which will enable the stakeholders to recognise that epistemological differences concerning how knowledge should be created exist, and then to design interventions to create bridges between them.
- This requires staff development for both the UK academics and academics in partner institutions; interventions with students which go beyond description of learning activities and move on to explore the educational beliefs, e.g. that portfolios are based on reflective learning; that seminar discussions are based on a belief that knowledge can be socially constructed.



References

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