

Academics' experiences of teaching Australian 'non-local' courses in Hong Kong

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*A paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education
conference, 'Crossing borders: new frontiers for educational research', Brisbane,
QLD,*

December 1-5, 2002.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is one of a series of related publications (Evans & Tregenza, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002) reporting on some research from an ARC funded project being conducted by the authors into the ways in which Australian universities establish collaborations with partners in Hong Kong and Papua New Guinea to offer courses in those countries. The research used principally qualitative methods (interviews, observations, document collection and analysis) to develop case-studies of a range of partnerships in Hong Kong. The project commenced in 1999 and is in its final stages. This paper discusses the experiences of staff who developed, administered and taught courses offered in Hong Kong by Australian institutions in partnership with a local provider. It presents and discusses findings on their reasons for working 'off-shore' in Hong Kong, their engagement with local staff and students, and their experience of Hong Kong students' coping with Australian curricula, pedagogies and assessment.

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). 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. Likewise, Guy was sceptical of the worth of imported educational programs and policies, and he argued 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 final stages. 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 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 'trade' and 'aid' 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. While 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 that are internationally competitive in their price and quality. It is on the Hong Kong context that this paper focuses.

Most of the research case-studies concern partnerships to provide multiple articulated courses for example: a Bachelors to Masters sequence, or a range of Masters specialisms. A number of discipline areas are 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.

The Establishment of non-local courses in Hong Kong

A feature of off-shore collaborations in Hong Kong is the way in which the local Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government regulates the provision of 'non-local courses' by

means of an Ordinance. In response to the rapid expansion in the number of overseas higher education programs being offered in Hong Kong, and the variation in quality and standards, the *Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance* came into operation in June 1997 to regulate the provision of non-local courses. The objective of the legislation is to protect the interests of local students by guarding against the marketing and provision of substandard courses. It also has the purpose of enhancing Hong Kong's reputation as a community which values international knowledge and ideas, and which wishes to sustain internationally recognised professional standards. The Ordinance is implemented through a system of registration and controls over advertisements, refunds and use of premises (Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, 1997).

Under the legislation, *all* courses conducted in Hong Kong leading to the award of non-local higher academic or professional qualifications are required to apply for registration. The major criteria include:

(a) In the case of a course leading to the award of non-local higher academic qualification, the course must be offered by a recognised institution and is itself recognised by its home country as being of a comparable standard to a similar course operated by the institution in the home country;

(b) As for a course leading to the award of non-local professional qualification, it must be recognised by the relevant professional body in the home country.

(Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance, 1996, Section 10, p. A666).

If a regulated course is conducted by a non-local institution in collaboration with a local university, it may be exempted from registration. In 2001, there were 327 registered courses and 318 exempted courses in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Education Department, 2001) with the United Kingdom having 54 percent, Australia 31 percent and the USA seven percent. The cost of registering a course is HK\$33,000, with an additional HK\$18,000 per annum maintenance fee. The successful registration or exemption of a regulated course requires an assurance that the standard of the course, and the award it leads to, is similar to that offered in the home country.

There have been some discussions and deliberations about the nature and operation of the ordinance. These are best represented in the report of a forum on the Ordinance that was initiated as a result of our research project (*The future of the regulation and provision of non-local courses in Hong Kong Forum, Summary Report*. <http://www.ouhk.edu.hk/NLCforum>)

Academics' experience of teaching and administering Australian courses

Although the fieldwork characteristics of each case-study varied depending on the particular circumstances, staff were observed at course marketing and information sessions, course induction sessions, and lectures, tutorials and other course events. The Australian academics involved in the development, administration and teaching of the courses, along with the local Hong Kong tutors, were also interviewed on an individual basis. Sixteen Australia-based staff working with the Hong Kong institutions and twenty-eight Hong Kong-based staff were interviewed and observed (often on several occasions). The interview questions were tailored to the particular courses and the circumstances. In general, they covered matters such as the origins and establishment of the course, why particular departments/institutions considered offering Australian courses in Hong Kong, marketing

issues, experiences of teaching the course, cultural issues and the localisation of course materials. Interviewees were also asked about the nature of their involvement and how they analysed their international work as part of their careers and lives. What follows is a brief overview of a selection of the responses received from both the Australian and Hong Kong staff involved in the development, administration and teaching of Australian courses offered in partnership with a Hong Kong institution.

Reasons for working 'off-shore'

The academic staff in the case-studies we undertook in Hong Kong could be grouped into three almost equal groups on the basis of their amount of experience. There were novices: those involved in their first two years' work only in Hong Kong; those who had three to five years' experience and who had often also worked in other nations, usually Singapore; and those who had worked extensively over more than five years in Hong Kong and other nations. Another way to categorise the staff is in terms of their orientation to working offshore. There was a small group who disliked, even loathed it, and would much prefer to teach only in Australia; another large group enjoyed the international work (and sometimes the extra financial benefits), but found that it was often hard in terms of workload and the disruption to family and personal life; and there was another small group who loved working offshore in Hong Kong and found it highly stimulating and elected to do as much as they could. (In PNG, some of these types of staff also became strongly committed to 'helping' PNG and elected to spend more and more time, both personal and professional in the country, and hosting people from PNG in Australia.)

It was typical of new courses being established in Hong Kong for the staff involved (usually only one or two) to be keen and enthusiastic about the opportunity to work in Hong Kong. Often they were the people who initiated the venture and they invested a lot of time in trying to make it work. They perceived multiple benefits if they could make the course successful. These ranged from the practical ones of improving their course's viability and their department's income, through to what might be a professional or vocational ethic to help enhance professional or work practices in Hong Kong (all courses were of a professional or vocational kind.) However, for established courses, especially those with large enrolments (that is, offering several units with up to 200 or so students each), it was often the case that the Australian teaching staff included some people who had no particular inclination to work in Hong Kong but had agreed to do so at the request of a manager, or they were required to work in Hong Kong as part of their job contract. For some such staff the teaching was just 'part of their load' and they took it in Hong Kong and for some, it was an extra load for which they were paid an additional amount. (In some cases, the financial rewards were significant and amounted to tens of thousands of dollars extra). It was notable from our interviews that the disparities between the terms and conditions for staff were substantial. At the worst, the teaching counted as normal teaching load, with no extra recognition for the travel and disruption to family and personal life, weekend economy class flights to Hong Kong staying in budget hotels or other accommodation, high numbers of contact hours each day in Hong Kong, and returning to Australia to teach the next day. At best, there was additional money, business class flights (usually if working the next day), days off in Hong Kong and good hotel accommodation and expenses. Needless to say, the aforementioned group of staff who disliked working in Hong Kong were most likely to endure the former exploitative conditions!

Initially, some Australian staff involved in off-shore courses, saw international activities as a serious distraction from their research and scholarship and they resisted undertaking the work. The intensification of work in universities, especially around increased teaching and other workloads, and the pressure to engage in and/or boost research performance has overlapped with the pressures to increase international students. Generally, the resistance reduced as they become more involved and committed to working in/with Hong Kong, but

there often remained grumbles about workload. Other staff accepted offshore work as part of the job, especially when it is a requirement of their employment agreement or they received an additional payment above their normal salary. One Australian staff member reported that 'the funding formula encourages off-shore teaching' in his university and, therefore, it was both strategically and personally important to undertake it.

Engagement with local staff and students

Australian institutions varied in their provision of face-to-face 'tuition' in Hong Kong. The range of provision was from an orientation session only, through to weekly classes. Typically, a university would offer some regular tutoring using a local tutor, possibly with the option for the students to phone or email the tutor for personal assistance, and university staff would visit once per semester. Ironically, this pattern of tutorial support would not normally be provided to Australian off-campus students, but was done because Hong Kong students seek and expect such contact. Typically, the courses comprised study guides, textbooks and online access to further resources for students.

The Australian staff rarely expressed concern or unwillingness to travel to Hong Kong in terms of safety or health issues. If they had not visited Hong Kong before, they were typically slightly worried about what it would be like and how they would manage, but if they had visited before, or once they had visited for their courses, any concerns of this kind dissipated. All staff reported working extremely long hours during their visits to Hong Kong. Most teaching periods were of one week duration involving face-to-face tutorials and lectures, meetings, evaluations, planning sessions and other events that often went well into the evenings and sometimes over weekends. As many of the Hong Kong students were working professionals with family commitments, individual meetings regarding student progress were generally scheduled in the evening. In addition to their Hong Kong work, staff usually tried to maintain their university work online in order to minimise their back-log of work upon their return.

Some institutions reported difficulties finding and employing good local tutors who are well-versed in the subjects. Local tutors typically instructed the students at what seemed to be a furious pace, switching from Cantonese to English as they went. Some institutions providing Masters courses reported that using their best Hong Kong graduates from previous years to tutor was very successful. Likewise the students seemed to appreciate this, too. The experience was that these tutors really knew the courses and its approach, in effect they were firmly inducted into the Australian institution's 'course culture' and the students knew that they were dealing with an 'insider'.

Coping with Hong Kong students coping with Australian curricula, pedagogies and assessment

A problem arises when institutions export courses into other countries, sometimes at the expense of locally derived knowledge and skills. This is often manifest in the assessment structures and processes designed and developed outside of the learner's own nation. Both the Australian and local tutors agreed that 'off the shelf Australian courses and materials need to be adapted to suit the needs of the Hong Kong students.' However, some subjects lend themselves more readily to the Hong Kong context than others. Australian tutors would often attempt to localise courses by incorporating local readings and using their local teaching counterparts to contextualise the material. While some Hong Kong tutors commented that they are only part of the solution and that the courses need to be more obviously localised, they recognised that the Ordinance regulations present some limitations with respect to the localisation of Australian courses for the Hong Kong context.

The students usually had educational backgrounds formed in Hong Kong secondary schools and training institutions, sometimes some years ago. Staff commonly reported that the students were not familiar with the reflective practice and critical thinking approaches to learning expected in Australian professional courses. They also noted that the students, similar to their Australian counterparts, often worked long hours and, especially for women, family commitments made study difficult. Also some staff reported that the students reported employers who were unco-operative in giving study time or help and access for undertaking workplace-based assignments. These problems are made more difficult for Australia-based staff to deal with in Hong Kong because they do not usually have the close professional or industry contacts that they have in Australia, and also the language and cultural differences are ones that are difficult to bridge. Generally the local staff are unable to help a great deal as their employment is usually sessional and they have other full-time jobs to cope with.

Australian academic staff reported that the Hong Kong students were more reticent to ask and respond to questions in class, or to do more than absorb the information presented. This is often reported by expatriate staff in Hong Kong but, as Biggs, (1996) Kember (1999) and Robinson (1999) argue, the explanation for this and other 'common' learning characteristics is often complex and cannot be reduced to cultural stereotypes. Some staff recognised that their discursive pedagogies relied on sophisticated oral and aural skills in English which the students usually did not possess. Both Australian and Hong Kong staff, reported that their students also struggled with their English language reading and writing skills. They typically said that Hong Kong students find it difficult to work within English while simultaneously developing a conceptual framework within which to undertake their assignments etc. As a result, some Australian staff commented that they invest a great deal of extra time and energy into reading, analysing and commenting on assignments because the written expression is often awkward and difficult to read.

Arguably, related to this matter of language difficulties is the issue of plagiarism. This was frequently raised as a problem by Australian staff and, to a lesser extent, by some local tutors. Observations of induction sessions, in particular, and classes to a lesser degree, showed that Australian staff frequently presented very clear and substantial explanations of plagiarism and what it meant if it was identified in assignments. Plagiarism was often explained in terms of it being a complex cultural issue-not so much 'stealing' another's work, but respect for the author's words and argument (see Li & Cheung, 1996). As explained by a local tutor, '...schools in Hong Kong prepare students in a certain way. That is, by reproducing the work of the masters. You don't change their words. Also the Chinese fear of failure plays a part so the safest option is to give back the standard text given that the education in Hong Kong is about the transmission of knowledge.' Another local tutor's interpretation was that students do not feel 'safe' presenting their ideas in English, more particularly they are not comfortable writing in 'academic' English and therefore find it difficult to make links between the English and their own words.

The limitations on discursive pedagogies addressed above, together with the difficulties of plagiaristic approaches to written assignments by the students, presented some important challenges for off-shore teachers in Hong Kong. Responding to these challenges needed to be undertaken in the context of working offshore, within the requirements of the Ordinance, and without compromising the learning and assessment for the course in question. Forms of assessment that require reflection on, and analysis of, practice that is grounded in the reading and study undertaken by the student are worthwhile, partly because they do not encourage plagiaristic regurgitations of 'the masters'. (What 'master' has written on their workplace or personal professional practice?) However, the volume of reading and writing required needs to be commensurate with the time and effort normally required of a student, and not on the volume of reading and writing undertaken by an Australian student in such time.

Assessment processes varied depending on the requirements and nature of the particular course being offered. In some cases, assignments were marked entirely by local tutors, others were marked by a combination of both Australian and local staff, and others entirely in Australia. Exams were also a common feature. For some courses, assessment criteria were identical to those offered at the Australian partner institution-in which case it was seen as a measure of 'quality control'. However, some allowances for grammatical errors were made due to the aforementioned difficulties with the English language. Some institutions reported that the local teaching staff were often tougher in the marking of assignments than their Australian counterparts. Other institutions adapted assessment strategies and frameworks where students were required to draw on their own experiences incorporating the local context. One local tutor commented that she needed to clarify the assignment components and expectations to students due to the style differences between assignments set in Hong Kong and those set in Australia. For example, Hong Kong set assignments have very clear, precise instructions, whereas, Australian set assignments tend to be more abstract and relate to the students' own experiences and work practice-a style these students are unfamiliar with in their traditional Hong Kong schooling.

Final comment

The previous discussion provides an overview of some of the main aspects of local and Australian staff working on Australian courses in Hong Kong. It captures some of the main features of a complex social and political landscape surrounding 'non-local' courses in Hong Kong, and 'offshore delivery' of Australian education. In essence, this paper is part of a set of papers that represent 'work-in-progress'. It remains now to explore and analyse the findings at greater depth and to theorise and articulate this work in subsequent publications.

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