

TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: DOES IT PREPARE GRADUATES FOR A GLOBALIZED WORLD?

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Abstract

The establishment of higher educational hubs in Malaysia and Singapore has spurred the growth of transnational education offerings in Asia, and attracted foreign higher education providers to set up branch campuses in these countries. In this paper we ask whether transnational education as practiced in Malaysia has a particular contribution to one aspect of the student experience – preparing graduates for an increasingly globalized world (Urry 2002). We considered the contribution that internationalisation of curriculum and the international experience of students and staff bring to the development of graduate capabilities suited to a globalized world. The opportunities that transnational education bring to the learning experiences of students were studied. The paper reports on an empirical study conducted in Australia and on transnational campuses in Malaysia to illustrate the extent to which current educational practice equips students to operate beyond national boundaries and suggest what needs to happen in order to realize the potential of transnational education for preparing students to operate in a globalized environment.

Keywords: Globalization, transnational education, internationalisation of curriculum, branch campuses

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the contemporary higher education imperative to produce graduates capable of operating in an increasingly globalised world (Urry, 2002). It is a mission taken on by many universities as is indicated by the fact that QS university rankings, incorporates in its measures the international experience of academics (University Alliance, 2014). The paper is focused on one form of provision of higher education, transnational education, and looks at both theoretical potential and current practice based on an empirical study.

KEY CONCEPTS – TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION, INTERNATIONALISATION, GLOBALISATION

Transnational education here refers to an arrangement in which a student studies for an award granted by a university based in a country other than the country in which the student is studying (Global Alliance for Transnational Education, 1997, p.1). Numerous organisational arrangements for transnational education are possible from branch campuses to partnerships, franchises, mutual recognition of awards, study abroad and student exchange programs, and distance education. Transnational education is expanding while modes of delivery and policy approaches continue to evolve on a country-by-country basis (McNamara, Knight, & Fernandez-Chung, 2013). There is a range of motives for increased engagement in transnational education. China, for instance, has been said to use transnational education for academic capacity building and knowledge transfer from foreign partners. Malaysia, on the other hand, looks to international student recruitment and transnational education as a source of revenue (McNamara, Knight, & Fernandez-Chung, 2013).

Internationalisation of higher education referred in the 1990s to specific initiatives such as inclusion of 'international studies, international educational exchange and technical cooperation' (Knight, 2004). The concept has broadened to 'the incorporation of an

international and intercultural dimension into the preparation, delivery and outcomes of a program of study' both for domestic students and for 'foreign' students (Leask, 2009, p. 209).

Globalization and global interconnectedness have had a range of impacts on higher education. Features of the globalized environment of that impact on higher education include: professionals engaging with one another in a fast and efficient manner across borders; and 'the demand for higher education and courses and programs that offer skills and knowledge and competencies that have currency in the job market in a globalized world' (Van Damme, 2011, p.2). Responses to the globalized environment include: 'the proliferation of a number of higher education partnerships and arrangements between institutions across countries'; and 'institutional missions that includes the notion of preparing students for a globalized world' (Chow, 2013).

THE ISSUE AND RESEARCH QUESTION ADDRESSED

The issue addressed here is 'how well does transnational higher education as practiced through branch campuses in Malaysia contribute to the preparation of students for life and work in a globalized world?' In working towards an answer we ask 'what could this form of transnational education potentially contribute?', 'what is the current practice?' and 'what would need to happen to realise the potential?'

POTENTIAL OF TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Transnational education by definition involves provision of education in more than one country. Hence academics at transnational education campuses have to consider more than one national context.

Students on transnational education campuses can be exposed to alternative cultures, more than one understanding of concepts, to alternative forms of learning and teaching practice, and to diverse learning environments. Transnational education has the potential to offer students the opportunity to attain graduate attributes that home universities are working

towards. For instance, 'Global citizenship' is an attribute that is fairly common across Australian universities (Barrie, 2009, p.28). At branch campuses, students in engineering courses that include engineering site visits as part of the course experience may conduct virtual visits of engineering sites in Australia involving advanced technology, as well as conduct physical site visits in branch campus to consider issues from a variety of standards and practices. With the introduction of new technologies on the uptake in most Australian campuses, the opportunities for a range of multicultural perspectives and cross-cultural experiences may gain more traction. 'Cultural understanding' is another graduate attribute that branch campuses can contribute towards utilizing their diversity of students and faculty and active interflow of ideas and views. Contextualisation of courses could assist in developing this graduate attribute.

INTERNATIONALISATION AND GLOBALISATION

The research element of this paper is informed by the concept of transnational education, discussed above, internationalisation of education, and the concept of globalization in relation to higher education. The empirical element of the paper, and the exploration of current practice, is based on an Australian Office for Learning and Teaching project *Learning without borders*, which was conducted by the authors (see Mazzolini et al, 2012). The project focused particularly on the provision of higher education through branch campuses.

The project was charged with recommending approaches to international and cross-cultural teaching excellence in a transnational education context, which is pertinent to the present topic, i.e., the preparation of graduates for a globalized world.

RESEARCH METHODS EMPLOYED

Methodologically, a case study approach is taken in this paper (Yin, 2003) with a view to adding to the understanding of the potential of the type of transnational education addressed, to contribute to preparation of graduates for a globalized world. Taking a case study approach means the findings are an interpretation, and conclusions reached may not be generalisable to other contexts. While data collection has included responses from

academics engaged in a range of transnational education categories, the focus of the study reported here has been on the Australian campuses and the Sarawak, Malaysian campuses of Curtin University and Swinburne University of Technology.

The methods employed in exploring the research questions included the following: web searches, review of policies and procedures, surveys using questionnaires, and conducting individual interviews and focus groups. Firstly, transnational education policies and procedures of the institutions participating in the study, were used to identify arrangements established for the provision of transnational education and policies on internationalization, including internationalization of curriculum. An online survey with 22 items addressed the understanding of internationalization, and of internationalization of curriculum, and learning and teaching practices by involved academics. The questionnaire investigated experiences in working in offshore locations and views on what worked well and what did not. Sixty four (64) completed questionnaires were received from respondents. Additionally, individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted to further explore the experiences of academic leaders working in a transnational education context, and understand their views on how transnational education and internationalisation policies and procedures could best address internationalization of curriculum. Individual interviews were conducted with thirty two (32) academic staff who held senior positions and were in leadership roles at Curtin and Swinburne university, located at both the home and branch campuses. Four (4) focus group interviews were in addition conducted on the Malaysian campuses in conjunction with project workshops. The student learning experience element of the research questions was addressed indirectly using observations of branch campus academics and by comparing policies, procedures and practices with opportunities for contextualisation of learning and assessment. The paper is informed by the range of data derived and the extracts from responses quoted in this paper are derived from interviews.

CURRENT PRACTICE – FINDINGS

The study reported on here gathered data from home campus and local academics and institutional leaders engaged in transnational education delivery, mostly through branch campuses. The delivery includes face-to-face input by academics based at a home campus and substantial delivery by local academics. In all cases a balance had to be struck between home and local academics on educational decision-making; in particular who specified the intended learning outcomes and who determined the curriculum content, the learning and teaching methods, the design of learning resources, the assessment tasks and assessment grades.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

The term locus of control is used in the project in an organisational sense describing possibilities for division of responsibilities in TNE between staff on the home campus and those on branch campuses. The term locus of control is also used in psychology to refer to the impact on an individual's behaviour of the individual's understanding of whether a matter is within one's own control or is controlled externally to the individual. While the expression locus of control is used in the project to describe/categorise TNE situations the impact on individuals involved in can depend, at least in part, on their understanding of whether particular TNE decisions are within their area of control or are external to them. Rotter (1966) postulated that when individuals believed that the results of their behaviour were governed by destiny or by powerful others, it indicated that they believed in an *external locus of control*, whereas when individuals thought that they themselves were responsible for the consequences of their behaviour, they believed in an *internal locus of control*, and that the inclination to believe in an *external locus of control* or *internal locus of control* could be explained from a social learning theory perspective.

In the context of TNE, from a branch campus perspective 'locus of control' could be interpreted as the power or control, unit coordinators and course coordinators at home

campuses exercised for quality assurance in the delivery of units and courses at offshore branch campuses. From the empirical data gathered from branch campus academic staff in the ALTC-Learning without borders project, younger academics who had little exposure to teaching in international higher education settings, in particular, believed that the unit was not in their control as opposed to mature and more experienced academic staff at branch campuses who had worked internationally in higher education settings. The social learning perspective referred to by Rotter (1966) could be believed to be in play here. It could be claimed that individuals who had higher *internal locus of control* took more responsibility for the successful delivery of units at the branch campuses, than individuals who believed that successful delivery of the units rested mainly with unit coordinators based at the home campus. This may also be relevant to leadership abilities among branch campus academics. Academic staff who demonstrated leadership capacity, discerned via statements gathered in the empirical data, could be believed to have higher *internal locus of control*.

In the cases studied we found a variety of approaches to the balance of decision-making. We divided these into four broad approaches: home institution control; limited transnational campus control; distributed control; and local campus control. How these approaches played out in practice is detailed below.

Under the home institution control model, curriculum design, learning resources and assessment were determined by home campus academics and are the same for students at any location. It might be substantially delivered by home campus academics on a fly-in-fly-out basis, with some local tutors, or might be delivered by local academics under guidance from the home campus. As an example a home campus based unit co-ordinator stated:

“We taught in block mode. We fly our staff up there to do all of the lectures and we’ve run one of the small groups and the partners will provide some tutors to run the other small groups. We developed and managed all of the assessment. We did all of the marking”.

Another reported *‘I am prescriptive. I provide a marking grid down to ½ a mark’.*

At the branch campus end a local academic stated:

“The package come with all the outcomes, assessments, PowerPoint slides and other documents, I went over the whole thing and modified a little bit”.

This model was applied mostly in undergraduate programs during the initial stages of branch campus operations at both Swinburne and Curtin.

In the limited transnational campus control model, the program is substantially delivered by local academics, maybe with some visits from home campus staff. There were opportunities for contextualisation of learning activities and/or assessment items. Assessment or a sample of assessment is moderated by home campus academics. In engineering, for example, a Deputy Dean on the home campus stated:

“We’re really striving to say that the two programs are equivalent but you don’t have to be identical. So for example, in engineering, codes of practices are quite important and the Malaysians will use their codes of practice there but also cross reference with our ones as well. They’ll use some of the design examples which are more about the Malaysian context than an Australian context”.

In this model local input may be modest. In the experience of a branch campus Unit Convener:

Staff may introduce their way of presenting but by and large the content of the teaching material comes from [the home campus]. Staff are free to present it in their own way. Staff have absolute freedom to do what they want but must conform with material and content.

The limited transnational campus model was applied in the undergraduate programs after two or three years of running the course and the home campus unit coordinators had been working with branch campus unit leaders.

Programs under the distributed control model are substantially delivered by local academics. Elements of the curriculum along with learning resources might be designed locally. Learning and teaching activities and assessment can be contextualised. Local educational decisions are constrained only by an obligation to attain the same learning outcomes. This model may include sample assessment moderation by the home institution. A home campus Deputy Dean provided a picture of the way this plays out:

“Before the start of semester we each swap our unit outlines across to ensure that our assessment for example is compatible, our learning objectives are compatible. They will provide to us with what their major assignment is, or what their exam is and we’ll just QA (quality assure) that and say “yep, that’s ok”.

A local campus Unit Convener described the operation as:

“I get some material from Australia, like unit outline, slides, etc., I generally just take it as guideline and I develop my own material, my own unit outline, and then I get approved, get suggestions from my counterpart. Teaching method also, I adopt my own”.

Local campus control sometimes applies. Here the curriculum and delivery decisions are determined by local academics subject to accreditation by the home institution. This could be an award, a major study or an elective offered on the local campus only. In some cases these studies might be taken by home campus students though study aboard options. Only a couple of instances were found in this study. A major entitled ‘Borneo Studies’ developed on the Curtin University Sarawak campus provides an example. One branch campus Unit Convener reported ‘*we are not entirely free of curriculum development responsibilities*’.

In the distributed control model the branch campus is considered as a mature campus by the home campus and relationships between the home campus and branch campus are often shaped by structures and standards demanded by qualifications agencies and professional accrediting bodies in both countries. For example, TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality

Standards Agency), the body that states that students studying in Australian campuses, whether they are home campuses or branch campuses, must have similar learning experiences. This ensures assurance of quality of programs and delivery systems. Similarly, the branch campuses have to adhere to standards set by their home countries as well. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) often requires branch campuses to demonstrate autonomy in all the academic processes such as development of new courses to cater to regional needs, involvement of academics at the branch campus in developing curriculum, assessments, and grading systems. This allows for academic growth and potential for collaborative working models to be developed through the distributed control model.

Academics interviewed indicated that the locus of control adopted had an impact on the student learning experience. This could be pertinent to preparing students to operate in an increasingly globalized world. Students on transnational education campuses studying for an Australian award have their horizons broadened. However, a high level of home determination of curriculum content, educational resources, teaching and learning activities, and assessment items and grading can disadvantage students at transnational education locations who are unfamiliar with the Australia context of the learning design. From the point of view of transnational students some localised content and learning activities, along with some local assessment items, may be more pertinent allowing account to be taken of the experiences and context of local students, which is desirable if one adopts a constructivist understanding of learning processes. Some transnational campus adaptations may also prove pertinent to internationalisation of curriculum on the home campus. Consequences for student learning are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The locus of control and the student learning experience

The locus of control	Consequences for the student learning experience
1. Home institution control	Learning experiences are not tailored to the experience and context of local students, which may disadvantage students on the transnational education campus. The arrangement does provide local students with learning experiences derived from a different culture.
2. Limited transnational campus control	<p>The unit and assessment are the same regardless of whoever delivers the unit. Learning and teaching activities may be contextualised to be more relevant to local students.</p> <p>As learning and teaching activities may be adapted learning outcomes must be demonstrated to be equivalent to those attained by home institution students, usually achieved by using the same assessment. Local students engage in learning experiences related to both the home campus culture and the local culture.</p>
3. Distributed control	<p>Learning experiences can be tailored to local students.</p> <p>As learning outcomes must be equivalent to those of students at the home campus they will usually involve an element of Australian content. Local students then engage in learning experiences related to both the home campus culture and the local culture.</p>
4. Local campus control	Learning experiences can be tailored to local students. For local students the experience may be less globalized than curriculum controlled by the home campus. For students from the home campus taking the studies on a study-abroad arrangement this approach could provide a rich international learning experience.

REALISING THE POTENTIAL – DISCUSSION

The opportunity to realize the potential for preparing graduates for a globalized world depends on working toward internationalization of curriculum in its fullest sense at campuses at home and overseas. In transnational education it is also best facilitated where students experience a mix of local and home campus content and learning activities, assessed in a manner that respects the local context while meeting the requirements of the awarding institution, the home campus. This aligns with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency requirement of evidence of local educational decision-making (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2010, Section 2).

Each of the approaches to educational decision-making that we encountered has the potential to make a contribution to widening the knowledge-base and the cultural experiences of students beyond that experienced by students based only at a home campus. It is, however, the approaches that allow for some contextualisation of learning resources, learning activities and assessment that offer most in preparation of graduates for a globalized world. It is approach two – limited local input – and particularly approach three – distributed control – that best provide an internationalised experience for students. Approach four – home campus control – can provide a powerful international experience for home campus students undertaking it on a study-abroad basis but this model does little for local students on a transnational education campus apart from providing an element of their program that provides a better appreciation of their own context.

CONCLUSION

Internationalisation of curriculum, understood in its widest sense, is designed to prepare graduates for a globalized world. For students on home campuses and transnational education campuses available resources can be used to internationalise the student learning, for example, by actively sharing experience of international staff and international

students on campus and using student exchanges and study abroad opportunities as well as engaging in online interactions. This is most often achieved via the learning management systems that home and branch campuses share for learning and teaching delivery as well as the opportunities presented during academic visits to home and branch campus academics.

The task in this paper was to address the question 'how best can transnational higher education operations contribute to the preparation of students for the life and work in a globalized world?' We looked at the potential of transnational education to contribute and noted that by definition transnational education involves students in an international learning context. It can expose students to alternative cultures, to more than one understanding of concepts, to alternative forms of practice, and to more diverse learning environments. We then looked at practice in transnational education with particular reference to provision of transnational education through branch campuses and noted that the diversity of the students' learning experiences on transnational education campuses depended, at least in part, on the locus of control; where decisions about curriculum content, learning resources, learning activities, and assessment were made. Approaches to transnational education that allow for local contextualisation of the learning experience along with elements of curriculum meeting the requirements of the awarding institution, the home campus, offer the best prospect of preparing graduates for a globalized world.

The limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. It is based largely on the experience of delivery through two branch campuses. Branch campuses, which engage academics under the auspices of the awarding institution, provide an environment in which local decision-making can readily apply. However, delivery through other branch campuses models or via other forms of transnational education – such as direct delivery by academics from a home campus, partnerships, franchising and particularly study abroad schemes – may be associated with other opportunities for preparing graduates for a globalized world.

On the basis of the study reported here we conclude that the development of global citizenship can be realized through utilizing the resources provided by the home and transnational education campuses, inputs provided by staff and students with international experience, by extending the classroom to embrace the world beyond, and in relations between home and transnational campuses, and by adopting a distributed model of control of curriculum and teaching and learning activities.

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