

***Responding to the Challenges of Quality Assurance in Trans-National Education***

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## ***Responding to the Challenges of Quality Assurance in Trans-National Education –*** by Jennifer Weir, Fiona Wright, Martijntje Kulski and Beverley Oliver

### *Introduction*

The worldwide transformation of higher education (HE) towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in an increasingly globalised and competitive HE environment, leading to further diversification across the sector and an expansion in the provision of educational programmes across national boundaries. The use of new information and communication technologies in particular is driving a sharp increase in the delivery of trans-national education and makes the notion of ‘borderless’ education a reality. However, the delivery of online or ‘offshore’ educational programmes raises important questions about quality assurance both from the perspective of institutions providing these academic programmes nationally, as well as the students enrolled in these programme. Driving the push towards international quality assurance is both current and projected enrolment by students in universities outside their own countries. Their number was estimated to be 1.4 million in 1992, 1.8 million in 2000, and has been forecast to grow to 7.2 million students by 2025. The issue of how these programme should be monitored and who has responsibility for determining the quality of offshore providers is not clear in what has become an increasingly complex higher education environment.

It would appear that the regulation of educational programmes delivered across national borders is lagging well behind its rapid expansion and there is an emerging need to determine how best to ensure the quality of these programmes. It is in this context that we explore some of the issues involved in assuring the quality of university programmes offered by Australian universities to students in African countries and discuss some institutional and national responses to the challenges posed by transnational education.

### *Quality in Trans-National Education*

There are at least four dimensions of quality assurance: international, national, institutional and programme. There are various studies of trans-national education at the national and institutional level, but little relating to issues for practitioners ‘on the ground’ in terms of quality systems, particularly at programme level, and the challenges involved. Key quality issues include embedding a cycle of continuous improvement, meeting the requirements of the various national audit agencies, accreditation or reaccreditation, institutional quality systems, and programme monitoring for quality purposes, while at the same time developing quality practices within the context of higher education for the African countries involved. This includes taking account of different national and institutional cultures between Australia and Africa, and differing conceptions of quality. A key difficulty is determining the factors that are common, and those that differ for HE.

### *African Initiatives in Quality Assurance of Trans-National Programme*

Trans-national higher education in Africa is not new. University colleges in some African countries of the former British Empire offered degrees or began as colleges of the University of London - University College, Ibadan and the University College, Dar es Salaam being two examples. Much has changed particularly over the last 10-20 years. The challenges for African countries and higher education institutions with regard to the delivery of transnational programme are particularly complex and

African students are generally the recipients of programme, typically from developed nations. This situation is compounded by the potential impact of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which is designed to increase trade liberalisation internationally and includes “education” as a service sector.

The future of African higher education will depend on how it responds to these challenges. Responses in terms of quality assurance are essential. Many African countries and universities recognize this. Challenges to higher education in Africa include: (a) lack of clarity in vision and mission, (b) problems of quality and relevance of programmes of study and research, (c) lack of clear programme and institutional evaluation mechanisms, (d) financial and resource constraints, (e) lack of alternative ventures in resource mobilisation in addition to the public purse, (f) inefficiency in resource utilisation, and (g) poor quality and commitment of the leadership of the sector at all levels.

#### *Australian Initiatives in Quality Assurance of Trans-national Programme*

Australia has been involved in the ‘export’ of educational programmes as early as 1985 and it was estimated that by 2003 Australian universities were offering almost 1600 programmes across 42 countries. Although by far the majority of these programmes were offered in Asia (86%), Africa was ranked third by region, with 3% of programmes offered with most of these offered in South Africa.

Coupled with a decline in federal government support in funding for higher education, the rapid expansion of the tertiary education export market has led many universities in Australia to rely on offshore students for institutional growth and revenues. This has resulted in what is seen by some as a tension between the need to diversify income for universities, and the issue of quality assurance.

#### *Challenges for Quality Assurance in Trans-National Education*

It will be difficult to determine how useful evaluation strategies are without some sort of impact assessment. It is also exceedingly difficult to measure the quality of student learning and impact assessment. Indicators are difficult to develop for higher education in general, but in the context of trans-national education the challenges are even greater. However, a number of areas within universities (Business Schools, for example) have achieved recognition for their programme through other international quality assurance and accreditation, such as ISO. But what does “international accreditation” mean in terms of trans-national higher education? While the issue of regulation in Africa varies substantially, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in South Africa has set new challenges in this respect.

New accreditation procedures in South Africa have resulted in a reduction in the number of foreign providers. The HEQC has recently conducted an accreditation review of trans-national MBA programme resulting in the de-accreditation of ten programmes, including Australia’s Bond University MBA programme. As of late 2004, all institutions offering an MBA will be audited on a six-year cycle to ensure they have mechanisms in place to safeguard and enhance the quality of learning, teaching and research. The results will be made public. All new programmes must be accredited by the Committee in order to be offered in South Africa. Bond South Africa – a campus of Bond University Australia was a casualty of the new process. While the reasons for Bond not achieving MBA accreditation in South Africa may be

arguable, it is a good example of a host country not being satisfied with 'international' accreditation.

The delivery of online educational programmes from one cultural context to another also raises a number of challenges. It is therefore critical for institutions involved in the provision of these programmes to be aware of these issues so that the learning materials meet learners' needs, which are generally created by educationalists from developed nations and are therefore likely to reflect these cultural assumptions. For example, Western culture tends to assume an individualistic approach to learning, encourages students to question their teachers and to regard knowledge as transitory, whilst other cultures put great value on collaborative learning activities, respect for teachers, and reverence for existing knowledge.

In online trans-national learning, these cultural differences may be further compounded by the abstract nature of communication with the result that students from countries with cultures different to the culture embedded in the materials used for online learning may be disadvantaged.

### *Conclusion*

The key to successful trans-national partnerships in the design and delivery of higher education programmes is where there is an ongoing dialogue and mutual sharing of quality assurance processes and procedures between the host and recipient nations, as well as between institutions and their customers (the students). If higher education is to be viewed as a commodity, it is essential that students, particularly in developing countries, have assurance that their aspirations with regard to the quality of the programmes in which they enrol are met.