

LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT: OFFSHORE PROGRAMME IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

The number of New Zealand higher education institutions collaborative programmes in Asian countries is increasing. Students enrolled in offshore programmes have developed a range of learning strategies that meet the needs of their home learning environment. However those same learning strategies may not match the needs of their foreign education provider. Further to this, offshore students may not be familiar with the foreign lecturers' teaching approaches. The rapid internationalization of universities in countries such as New Zealand, and the adoption of the teaching of foreign degrees in countries such as Vietnam and China, makes it evident that a better understanding of offshore students' academic needs, expectations and study habits will enhance the students' learning experiences. Understanding the lecturer's role in adapting teaching and learning in offshore delivery is also a useful lens to apply. In this paper, we document the learning and teaching strategies adopted by the students in Vietnam and lecturers from a university in New Zealand to overcome the issues identified by the students themselves. The paper proposes cultural awareness and intercultural competence as vital requirements for academics who are involved in course planning, operations, and management, as well as subject and paper development and delivery offshore.

Keywords: offshore education, collaborative programmes, teaching approaches, learning approaches, learning strategies, intercultural competence, cultural awareness, computer science degree.

This paper builds on previous research in education, entitled: *Learning and Teaching Experiences in an Offshore Programme: Challenges and Strategies*. [1]

1 INTRODUCTION

Trade in higher education services is a billion dollar industry [2]. Many Western universities take advantage of foreign direct investment policies to invest in education overseas and set up education institutions or campuses in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The growth of international education has departed from the tradition where students from a source country would travel to a host country to access high quality education services. The departure is seeing an emergence of offshore education via distance learning, where students access education services via the internet as a communication and education delivery interface; for example, in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other innovative online learning platforms. The demand for higher education is also growing and trans-border and offshore education is increasing rapidly. According to UNESCO [3], the capacity of the public sector has not kept up with this demand; especially with the support of recent developments in Information Communication Technology. While a technology-enabled experience was previously quite poor for higher learning delivery [4], this situation has now changed and student satisfaction of online learning is growing swiftly. The ensuring growth in online learning has resulted in the creation of a very lucrative and competitive market. UNESCO [3] also reported that 44 of the 144 World Trade Organization (30%) members were education sectors open for international trade, and 21 of those had commitments to higher education. New Zealand is one of those 21 nations.

Offshore education first considered that programmes developed by host academic institutions and delivered outside of the host's country of origin provide many opportunities to students to earn an overseas qualification whilst remaining in their home country. Offshore education is also commonly referred to as *transnational education*. In 2001, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's Council of Europe defined transnational education or offshore education as:

All types of higher education study programmes or set of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country

different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the education system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national education.[3] (p.12).

Table 1. Modes of Offshore Education

Mode A	Cross-border supply (or distance education), in which an educational service is provided across borders but without the movement internationally of either student or teacher. e.g. an international student enrolled in a correspondence or distance course through an education provider, but studying from their home country.
Mode B	Commercial presence , in which the education provider establishes a presence in the country in which the student resides. e.g. through a twinning programme, articulation programmes or establishment of an offshore campus.
Mode C	Twinning , the presence of natural persons, in which the educator moves to the country of residence of the students to provide the service. It can be full or partial degree provision. Partial degree model is based upon a mixture of offshore and onshore study.

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education New Zealand Report[5] and Clear[6]

The growth of offshore education has drawn the attention of educators internationally in recent years; currently, there are several excellent publications in this area from Australia, America and Europe. However, offshore education is an under-researched area comparatively and there are limited publications available from New Zealand researchers. With the commercialization of education services growing at a phenomenal rate, all trends are pointing to continued growth[7], offshore education is becoming more of a focused development in the universities in New Zealand. There is a growing need to understand more about offshore programme developments, and the teaching and learning experiences of key stakeholders such as the lecturers and students. It is time that this research gap is addressed as an important component of international education literature.

2 BACKGROUND

In 2009, a bachelor of computing and information sciences degree programme was offered offshore in a university in Vietnam by a New Zealand university. The degree programme is a mixture of offshore (Vietnam) and onshore (New Zealand) study built upon a number of formal credit transfers from recognized prior learning undertaken offshore (Vietnam). Students who enroll in the offshore joint degree programme (would be awarded a joint degree from both the New Zealand and Vietnam universities if programme completion requirements are fulfilled. The model is considered a *twinning programme* (Mode C in Table 1: Modes of Offshore Education above).

The degree programme delivered in Vietnam has the following characteristics:

- Papers (a 15-week unit of study also known as *modules* or *subjects* in some countries) were developed by the New Zealand university and approved by the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The papers are part of the Bachelor of Computer and Information Sciences degree delivered by the Auckland University of Technology.
- Papers which are part of the joint offshore degree programme are delivered in the university in Vietnam by New Zealand lecturers.
- Papers offered are taught partly offshore (face-to-face), and partly online via Blackboard™ - an online course management system used by the New Zealand university.
- The programme is conducted in accordance with a formal agreement between the New Zealand and Vietnamese universities.
- Students who complete the programme are granted a joint degree of both bachelors' degrees of the New Zealand and Vietnamese universities.

After two years of running the programme offshore, a number of lecturers who had teaching duties offshore in Vietnam had expressed concerns about some plagiarism cases and the students' English language capability. Some lecturers of collaborative provision also noted that the majority of the

Vietnamese students enrolled in the New Zealand computing bachelor's degree in Vietnam were not familiar with the New Zealand lecturers' teaching approaches. The literature suggests that enhancing teaching and learning experiences in an offshore programme requires engaging students appropriately with the needs of students in an offshore context[8]. To run a programme offshore successfully, an understanding of the local environment could assist lecturers with their teaching duties. As suggested by Ziguras[9], staff involved in offshore programmes need to be able to bridge the cultural differences and apply local knowledge in order to provide students with what they want from a foreign degree. How to successfully achieve this ideal can vary given the mix of short block-mode face-to-face and online engagement opportunities. The context of the present study was to ask lecturers and students directly about their learning and teaching experiences in the offshore programme in Vietnam, and discover the various adoptions they employed to deal with the issues and challenges they faced. The study sought to identify specifically the key strategies that students and lecturers adapted from previous learning and teaching experiences to overcome the learning and teaching challenges they faced in the unique twinning programme of study.

3 METHOD

After reviewing literature and identifying the core focus of study an interpretivist approach was considered the most appropriate using a case study research methodology. Yin [10] defines a case study as "an empirical enquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.13).

The ability of an interpretive case study generally to understand the phenomena of the learning and teaching experience through the meanings that people assign to them was seen as most beneficial and would avoid a Western bias dominating the outcomes of the study. Rather than focus on empiric validity and reliability the case study would build the plausibility of the overall story from multiple perspectives, whilst allowing for a depth of individual experience to be represented. A strong benefit was also seen in the social construction of reality that can be achieved through a case study approach where light could be shed on how and why students and lecturers see the learning and teaching experiences the way they do.

The research focused on a contained issue 'Learning and teaching experiences in an offshore programme: Challenges and Strategies'. The data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with three lecturers from the University in New Zealand as well as online (blogs), recordings via the Blackboard™ learning management system, emails and journal recordings taken by seven students about their participant experiences throughout a semester of study in the offshore programme.

The interviewees were two Senior Lecturers and one Lecturer from the New Zealand university. One of those interviewed was the Programme Leader of the undergraduate degree at the time that the collaborative teaching was conducted. Students were recruited from final year students.

The data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's[11] process: data reduction, data display and then the drawing of conclusions.

All participants were given an information sheet about the research. Both lecturers and student-participants were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to signing the consent form. To ensure all participants' confidentiality was protected, all participants were given a code as an identifier. The researcher has ensured all data were treated with respect and confidentiality. All data collected, such as interview recordings, interview transcriptions, journals and analysis of data were stored in locked filing cabinets on the premises of the New Zealand university.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Learning and Teaching Challenges

The central themes concerning the learning and teaching strategies that were adapted by learners and lecturers in the offshore programme which emerged were: *English language, different teaching and learning approaches, distance learning, communication and intercultural related experiences*. Table 2 below summarizes the key learning and teaching themes identified.

Table 2. A Summary of Learning and Teaching Challenges

Learning challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English language difficulties • New Zealand lecturers' teaching approach. • Distance learning
Teaching Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students English language capability • Teaching and learning approach mismatch • Distance delivery impacted on delivery methods • Cultural related experience.

4.2 Learning and Teaching Strategies

4.2.1 Learning Strategies

Some students recognized the challenges they faced shortly after enrolment in the programme. Students commented that apart from experiencing English language difficulties, they felt that they were not familiar with the presentations delivered. One participant recorded in his journal saying that it took him about half a year to become familiar with the New Zealand lecturers' teaching approach. Rather than the familiar didactic learning approach they were experiencing new forms of class interaction, oral presentations, and peer and group assignments. In addition, students found self-study was a challenge. However, students showed a willingness to accept the New Zealand lecturers' teaching approaches, and came up with strategies to address those learning challenges as they saw that this would benefit them in further study at a master's level – particularly in consideration of future desires for overseas study.

Four students spoke of the different strategies they adopted to overcome their learning challenges, while the rest of the students did not specify whether they had made any attempt to adapt their approach. Two students tried to improve their English through practising much more with their lecturers, reading more English language articles, and attending additional English tuition classes. A couple of students preferred discussing the issues directly and actively sought advice from their lecturers on how to improve their English language abilities. Some students chose to welcome the learning experience with their New Zealand lecturers, discuss learning issues with lecturers openly for the first time on their discussion board and they voice their needs in learning. As commented by students SP1 and SP2 in two exemplar statements:

This paper should have some case studies and practical examples from VN (Vietnam). Thus, the students will be easier to reflect the learnt theories to the actual situations. [SP1]

To deal with those challenges, I have tried to discuss to lecturers as much as possible. Therefore, they helped me to improve my English skills as well as the presentation skill. I have also relied to read a lot of newspapers and other materials in English. Thus, I have understood their respects and views gradually. [SP2]

4.2.2 Teaching Strategies

Utilize Information Communication Technologies

Lecturers also attempted a number of ways to address the teaching challenges they encountered. In response to the challenges relating to distance teaching and learning, one lecturer tried to use technologies such as video conferencing to enhance communication in distance learning and teaching. In contrast, another lecturer felt that video conferencing did not really work that well in distance teaching but preferred to focus on the use of e-books. Another lecturer felt that collaborative technologies such as Wikis and Blogs did not work effectively; largely because the requirement to keep up to date with a blog was just beyond the students' capacity. He felt the opportunity to use the online discussion forum worked well. This was because students were forced to interact with each other and 30% of the assignment marks were based on engaged student participation.

Modifying Delivery Methods

Some lecturers felt there had been benefits as a result of the 100% online paper delivery which involved running papers in Vietnam at the same times of year when the semesters in New Zealand were running - combining students from New Zealand and from Vietnam into the same class. Benefits were seen in running papers offshore and onshore concurrently and integrating the Vietnamese and the New Zealand student experience into the same semester programme. As the lecturer describes it:

We ran it concurrently, mixing the Vietnamese students and the New Zealand students up in the same semester so that they are all doing the paper at the same time. I wanted to do that, to see how the Vietnamese students would respond to the New Zealand-based students who are a mixture of various nationalities. And how the New Zealand based students would respond to the Vietnamese students, given that they are coming from a more largely mono-cultural environment. And it was quite interesting to see them mix-in actually, and how their views – the exchange of the view – altered and changed during the semester. [LP2]

Support from Teaching Assistance

All lecturers noted the importance of the support from the university in Vietnam and the presence of teaching assistants in each of the papers delivered offshore. Lecturers agreed that this was hugely beneficial to the Vietnamese students because the teaching assistants had already completed the 15 week unit of study and were able to share their learning experience and adaptations with the students. This helped to engage them with key aspects of learning. Two lecturers explained it this way:

...it is very important is to have a good teaching assistant who is the first point of contact for the students, that way they have instant feedback – sometimes faster than from myself. [LP3]

What additional support they needed was in terms of their learning for these particular papers that we delivered there. Having him [the Teaching Assistant] there that was hugely beneficial to those students, because he [the Teaching Assistant] had already done the paper. He was able to tell them about his experiences on the paper, this meant that they then got more engaged with their learning. It's easy when they are doing offsite learning to lose engagement. [LP2]

The teaching assistance based on-site in Vietnam had a significant effect in supporting students with their learning needs; it also helped the students to overcome the English language barriers and the difficulties experienced in distance learning.

Online Learning Resources to Support Distance Learning

One of the recommendations made by the lecturers is that the New Zealand university should provide more resources to support distance learning. It was clear that the New Zealand lecturer recommended that the university's *KEYS programme*, which consisted of a series of short courses in relation to core academic skills such as academic writing, presentation skills and critical thinking. The programme is run by the New Zealand university's library staff and should be made available to students in Vietnam online in conjunction with the degree programme delivery. The lecturers believed the programme will be a good foundation to academic literacy.

Table 3. Summary of Strategies Adapted

Strategies adopted	<p>Learning strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice English more, attend additional English courses; read more (English) newspapers and articles to better understand a Westerner's world view. • Discuss learning issues with lecturers on the Blackboard learning management system. • Voice learning needs directly. <p>Teaching strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize technologies to enhance communication • Utilize technologies to enhance communication in distance learning • Modify delivery methods • Support from teaching assistance • Online learning resource support distance learning.
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5 CONCLUSION

In New Zealand over the last decade there has been a strong shift an 'aid' to a 'trade' approach of offshore education services. The international education sector has grown to include both international student mobility as well as the mobility of educational programmes and institutions across borders globally and locally. Degree programmes represent more than half of the offshore programmes internationally (see Figure 1.), with the majority of these programmes designed by Western

universities, and delivered to Asian countries where English is not their first language, education system, teaching and learning approaches and culture have significant difference to the West.

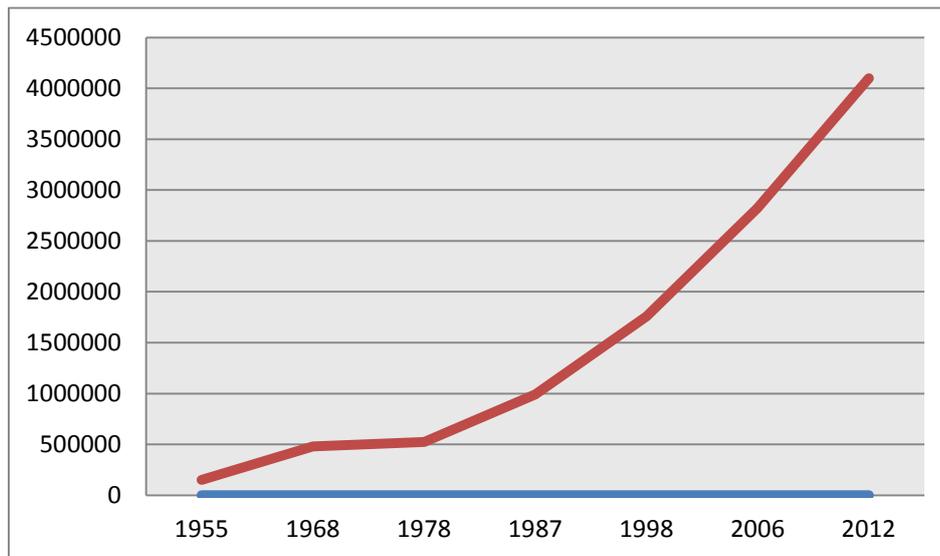


Fig.1. International Student numbers at the Tertiary Level from 1955 – 2012.[12]

Offshore programmes are an important area of international activity in most universities in New Zealand, and it has become an important part of the New Zealand university profile. The *New Zealand Education Strategic Plan 2010-2015*[5] indicates that tertiary education participation has expanded all over the world. At the same time, tertiary education has become more international, with greater global networking, and more mobile staff and students. Institutions should ensure that their international activities are managed effectively to achieve high-quality learning for international including offshore students. This study has been one attempt to identify some of the key issues facing lecturers and students and to consider some of the strategies adopted by participants to address learning and teaching issues in the delivery of an offshore computer science degree. Offshore programmes provide a unique opportunity for lecturers of the New Zealand university and unique opportunities for students in Vietnam to become intercultural learners, which in turn may enhance their teaching and learning experiences. Quality is fundamental to maintaining and enhancing the reputation of New Zealand qualifications and New Zealand education providers overseas. It is vital to the continued success of any offshore education initiatives that the developments in offshore programmes are educationally and culturally sustainable.

There may need to be a greater emphasis on online teaching and learning technologies development to better support offshore teaching and learning. The amount of effort described in the present study by both academic staff and students raises a new question about how to effectively encourage students to participate in online learning. The use of the Blackboard™ learning management system is more than a means of merely transmitting course material or exchanging email between students and lecturers, rather Blackboard™ needs to be able to more effectively provide communicative and participatory opportunities, and particularly to provide a range of spaces that encourage students to participate and share work and ideas to address the specific adaptations identified in this paper.

In relation to helping students overcome online learning difficulties, it may be a good strategy and practice to have more teaching assistants offshore. Given that the current offshore programme combines online and face-to-face teaching for this very reason, teaching assistants also play a more important part in localizing and interpreting the learning approaches of the courses designed and delivered by New Zealand universities. The teaching assistants are those former students who have successfully adapted to the offshore course; their experience and key adaptations can be shared and encouraged with the students on the papers they support. In addition, the teaching assistants, who are seen as cultural insiders, can assist the cultural outsiders – the New Zealand lecturers - to understand the local teaching and learning environment, the local business and communication practices and the wider education policies offshore. This will require some significant effort and commitment to this fundamental underlying principle of internationalization - to integrate the intercultural dimension into the delivery of offshore education in Vietnam.

The offshore computer science degree programme in Vietnam is now an established and integral part of the internationalization activity of both universities - in New Zealand and in Vietnam. The relationship is flourishing and further opportunities are being explored. The benefit of such activity is potentially far greater than just the aspect of financial gain; it is the opportunity for lecturers, students and support staff to be involved in significant intercultural exchange, and to integrate what they learn and adapt into their learning and teaching practice.

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