

## Introduction

The international knowledge network is constantly affected by developments beyond the control of academic institutions. It is established that education is continually challenged by the process of economic globalisation. Education needs to embrace transformations beyond its control to address the shifting paradigms created in education with globalisation and rapid unprecedented technological development. Programmes of internationalisation are a response to the current demands of globalisation. The portability of education and international student exchange aims at massification and accessibility of programmes to a global market. Education accessibility thus extends global expertise. Students are now global citizens who are no longer limited by geographical boundaries and aspire towards exciting study and research opportunities.

Transnational programmes may be imparted in a variety of delivery formats. Programmes can sometimes be delivered entirely in the host country or sometimes may require students to complete part of their degree with a partner institution. Sometimes the partner institution provides quality assured programmes to the host institution. These programmes are not only designed and moderated by the partner institution but there is ongoing exchange of facilitators creating a transnational community of practice enhancing both the host and partner institution.

## International inter-institutional partnerships

Internationalisation and globalisation exert a dominant influence in tertiary education and the boundaries of education are no longer restricted nationally. Common international trends first emerged in Europe and are now manifested in the Asia Pacific region. Tertiary institutions are at present engaging in inter-institutional partnerships to address the challenge of globalisation. Strengthening agreements between academic institutions within a particular country and across national borders will be central to the mobility of adult students (Guri-Rosenblit, 2006). The above mentioned ideas are encapsulated by Davis, Olsen and Böhm (2000) in their Model of Transnational Education shown in figure 1. This model maps all transnational education provision along two dimensions, a Student Dimension and a Provider Dimension.

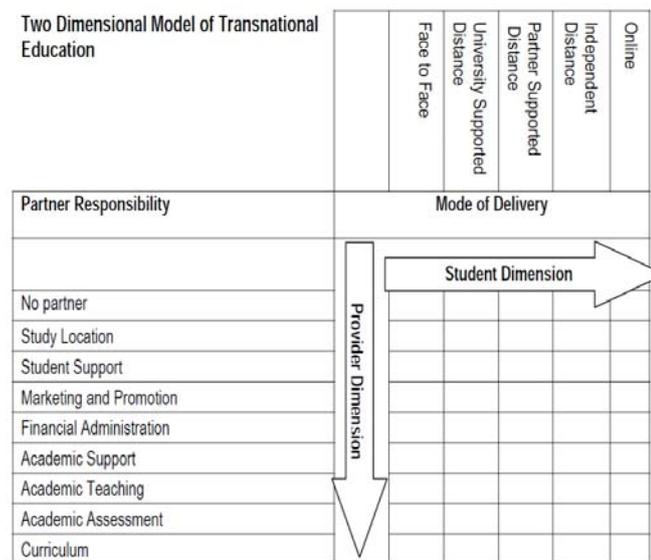


Figure 1. Source Davis, Olsen and Böhm, 2000

This two dimensional model identifies five transnational delivery options for student engagement; face to face, university supported distance, partner supported distance, independent and on-line. The provider dimension places emphasis on provider responsibilities. These are specified as no partner, study location, student support, marketing and promotion, financial administration, academic support, academic teaching, academic assessment and curriculum. This spans the transnational educational spaces created.

Several NZ educational providers are already engaged in transnational educational ventures. Olsen (2006) identified China, Malaysia and Vietnam, India and Indonesia as being New Zealand's top five priority countries for transnational education. 8, 413 international students of Asian origin were enrolled in Public Tertiary Education Institutions in 2010 (NZ Ministry of Education, 2008). The majority of international fee-paying students originated from the Asian region (88.9 per cent). South-East Asia was one of the prominent source countries for international students in New Zealand. Malaysia is currently the tenth largest source of international students, the third largest source of university students and second largest source of PhD students in New Zealand. In 2008, 2147 international students came from Malaysia to study in New Zealand which is a 70% increase since 2003 (O' Sullivan, 2009). This increase is progressive and increases the convergence between countries.

## **The Case Study**

This case involves a partnership between a New Zealand polytechnic and a Malaysian automotive technical institute. The institute offers its own Diploma in Automotive Technology. A written agreement was signed between the partner institutes specifying in detail how this particular transnational programme will operate. This written agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two institutes allows students, who have successfully completed the two-and-a-half year Diploma in Automotive Technology to transfer their study to the New Zealand polytechnic. The MoU requires the New Zealand polytechnic to acknowledge full recognition of the Malaysian Diploma in Automotive Technology and delegate 180 unspecified credits towards the Bachelor of Applied Technology (Automotive) programme. Under the MoU students are required to study for a minimum of 3 semesters in this New Zealand polytechnic in order to achieve a Bachelors qualification. The Malaysian qualifications are cross credited making them eligible to enroll and give them the opportunity to successfully complete the Bachelor in Automotive Technology degree. The overarching objective of this MoU is "to establish an international partnership for providing first class higher education for qualified...candidates through the joint efforts of both parties" (Unitec, 2007).

To assess the success and implications of such an institutional agreement it is imperative to determine student perceptions. Therefore this research explores the extent to which the aims and objectives of the partnership are achieved.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The research was designed to explore barriers overseas transnational students encounter with teaching and learning; and to reflect on the current teaching practices.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative methodology for this research was based on Creswell's (2007) recommendations that when a complex, detailed understanding of an issue is needed this detail can best be established by directly talking to people and empowering them to share their stories and "allowing them to tell stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (p. 40). Qualitative study places weight on individual opinions and feelings on issues that directly relate to or affect them. From this perspective the use of quantitative methodology was eliminated.

This qualitative research was a pilot evaluation and hence questionnaires were used as the main form of data collection. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) confirm that "qualitative, less structured, word based and open-ended questionnaires may be more appropriate as they can capture the specificity of a particular situation" (p. 247-248). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) indicate that questionnaires can be administered without the presence of the researcher and are often straightforward to analyse. Through semi-structured questionnaires respondents answered both closed and open qualitative questions. This method of data collection generated insightful spectrum of student opinions and perceptions on their transnational learning experience.

In addition interaction between students and teachers provided anecdotal evidence for this research. Informal conversations between teaching staff also provided valuable data to confirm student responses. Another useful resource was the student's reflections written on their weblogs.

## **Data Analysis**

The research generated a wide spectrum of feedback from students. The questionnaires were anonymous and were administered by a third party. Sixty five student questionnaires were distributed and forty nine were returned generating a 75% response rate. All students who participated in this research were males aged between 18-40years. In the semester during which this research was conducted the class consisted entirely of males, there were no female students enrolled. However in the earlier semesters there have been female students. The student cohort was multicultural, originating from countries such as New Zealand, Australia, USA, Africa, Eastern Europe, China, Korea, Malaysia, India, Bangladesh, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.

Eight clear themes emerged from this research on transnational students and the progression of their learning.

### **1. Culture shock**

In their home country respect for a teacher is paramount. Asian students considered questioning and challenging teachers as disrespectful. Many of these students thought it rude when local students interrupted in lectures or asked questions. One student declared "*I lose concentration during lectures when there is a lot interruptions as this does not happen back at home*" Student centred learning approach is a new learning style different from that in their home country. An academic stated that in the home country "*success is teacher's responsibility & parents give them the authority*". Responsibility for and ownership of their own learning was a concept alien to the students.

## **2. Lack of familiarity with modern tools and equipment.**

Teaching in their home institution is mostly at a theoretical level. The use of modern tools and equipment is restricted. The lecturer interviewed remarked that in

*“most Asian countries, for example China, students were well taught on a theoretical basis. They don’t have many chances to have hands on practice with modern tools and equipment. So some students may quickly grasp the theory but struggle with the practice for some time.”*

Lack of hands on experience was identified as a major barrier in learning and teaching. Some expensive equipment when used under unsupervised conditions created diffidence and reluctance with the students.

## **3. Differences in learning and teaching style**

Malaysian students found the student-centred learning approach difficult to cope with as they were accustomed to traditional teacher-centred learning approaches in their home country. Limited learning and teaching resources meant that the teacher’s role focussed on rote learning. Consequently as the lecturer observed *“They are working hard on taking notes in class, and seldom ask the question “why?”*. The various forms of assessment tools such as reflective logs, portfolios, peer evaluations are a new experience for transnational students as the primary means of assessment in their home countries are written tests or examinations. Asian and in particular Malaysian students are often inactive or passive participants in group discussions. A lecturer further confirmed that, *“ There’s also not many group assignment/homework in some countries.”*

## **4. Speed of delivery**

Malaysian students emphasised the delivery speed of classes as a negative impact. Students found it difficult to follow lectures when the content was covered at a faster rate than in their home countries. One of the lecturers interviewed stated that

*“Some overseas students may feel pressured when the speed of delivery of lectures is too fast to handle or too much to absorb especially as their English is not as good as a native speaker, or it’s a total new field of study. If there are not many overseas students in the class, the overseas students will suffer more as they may hesitate to talk to the lecturer about his/her problem if most of the other local students are doing ok”.*

## **5. Difficulty with English language and accent**

English is an additional language for most overseas students hence they have difficulty expressing themselves or understanding the accent used in the partner institute. A student revealed [the] *“First time I had a presentation to do I felt very nervous and did not know how to do it”*. Students have knowledge of the content but are at times unable to explain this to teachers and peers as their accent and language level acts as a barrier to successful communication. The language barrier was evident in the following student remark, *“I know what I am doing but it is difficult to explain it”*.

## **6. Lack of critical thinking skills**

Many students commented on the learning and teaching styles. The teaching styles in their home countries are different with 'prescribed textbook' teaching taking dominance. The research based or student centred learning mode makes it difficult for students to adjust to the new, unfamiliar learning environment. The teacher comment was *"Some students have developed study habits in their home countries to stick to the prescribed textbook to get good results. Here, students are encouraged to do research even though it's a new topic and they were not taught before. Most overseas students lack research skills. They are not good at doing research, using the resources available to learn and develop their opinion"*.

## **7. Lack of confidence and assertiveness**

Poor English speaking skills leading to lack of confidence was also identified as a deterrent to their performance. Students explained that they are continuously challenged by their failure to express their knowledge coherently as their vocabulary is limited and they cannot find the correct words to articulate their thoughts and ideas. The lecturer remarked *"when they have some difficulty in their studies, such as cannot understand the lecture, cannot express their ideas in English clearly, failure in the test/exam, or communication gap with other students or don't know how to relieve their pressure, or don't know how to manage their time to make their study more efficient. In addition it is culturally inappropriate for the student to interrupt or question the teacher; consequently assertiveness is considered discourteous and therefore unacceptable.*

## **8. Use of slang, jargon and technical terminology**

Furthermore the use of slang, jargon and technical terminology create additional challenges for overseas students. Their language is generally formal text book language and conversational informal style in spoken English confuses their comprehension.

## **Discussion**

Culture is the overarching principle that links the eight themes of the research findings. It must be emphasised that cultural differences dominated the results.

Culture shock according to Toffler (1970) has two dimensions. It is not simply the imposition of a new culture on an old one but it is also the shock, experienced by the individual when placed in an unfamiliar culture, when the original culture of the individual is no longer there. This causes a breakdown in communication, a misreading of reality and an inability to cope. The processes Toffler (1970) describes are pertinent and applicable to the effects of globalisation and adaptation to change and the implications for education in a world wide context.

This research affirmed that cultural adaptation affected the class room interaction and response, which in turn affected student performance. Transnational students have to cope with the experience of the cross cultural adjustment. Law and Eckes (2000) established four stages in the transition or settlement process for the students in the new culture. These are: honeymoon, hostility, humour and home. In the initial honeymoon stage all is exciting and novel. However soon reality strikes and leads into the hostility stage where comparisons are

made resulting in unhappiness, frustration, anger, anxiety and even depression. Many academic problems arise during this stage and rejection of the new environment may develop. However it is inevitable that the students work towards resolving these issues and enter into the third stage, the humour stage. They begin to feel accustomed to the new environment and look back in humour at the past mistakes and miscommunications. Finally in the home stage they feel at home and comfortable and are able to live successfully in two cultures.

The differences in learning and teaching styles in the home and host countries presented vital challenges that the student found difficult to address. This impacted on their active classroom participation as they were accustomed to being passive learners. In the workshop context as well, their prior theoretical engagement and absence of hands on practice in the home country created diffidence in the new student centred learning environment. In addition, research skills and independent critical thinking were drastically lacking. Theoretical text book and rote learning was the underlying fundamental teaching style that the students were accustomed to in their home learning environment. International students often come from non-Western educational systems in which emphasis is placed on teaching methods that include memorisation, observation and imitation (Roberston, 1992; Grarcha and Russell, 1993; Helms, 1995 as cited in Mu, 2007). The “learning by doing” approach was relatively non-existent in the overseas educational system. Andrade (2006) observed that overseas “students lacked discussion skills and had inadequate listening comprehension for extended lectures. They were accustomed to indirect writing styles and unaccustomed to analysing the strengths and weaknesses of an argument.” (p.139)

Consequently critical thinking and research skills are limited as these are traditionally discouraged in the educational environment at home. Analytical skills so desirable in higher education for global application of knowledge are significantly affected. This often adds to sub-standard performance of some of these overseas students and demonstrates conflict between the two diametrically opposed systems.

Semantics and linguistics play a significant role in intercultural understanding and communication and is highlighted in this research. Professors’ accents, idiomatic styles, humour and choice of examples in lectures posed problems (Andrade, 2006). Students involved in this research expressed similar concerns. Ramsay, Barker and Jones (1999) found that first-year international students at an Australian university had difficulties understanding lectures in terms of vocabulary and speed, and with tutors who spoke too fast or gave too little input. The use of slang, jargon and technical terminology proved problematic. “Many English language learners often express frustration at not being able to follow the slang, jargon, colloquialisms and idioms ubiquitous in the conversations of native English speakers”(Lieb, n.d.) Difficulty understanding colloquial language has been ranked highly among the problems cited by international students (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000).

Students for whom English is a second language are often reluctant to speak out in class or seek help because they lack confidence in their ability to communicate and are fearful of causing embarrassment for themselves or their teachers (Ramburuth & Birkett, 2000). As in the study by Robertson et al., (2000), the students surveyed in this study reported that difficulties with the language, anxiety and lack of confidence restricted effective participation. International students with low English fluency lacked confidence in interacting with people and were ill at ease in class discussions (Yeh & Inose, 2003) and show lower level of assertiveness and consequently display poor academic performance. Assertiveness is an essential skill requisite to success in an individualistic and competitive Western oriented educational system. Students coming from a collectivist culture where interpersonal harmony

is highly prized, are self-restrained and less assertive than their New Zealand colleagues in the host country. Asian students have been reported to have more acculturative stress than other groups of international students. Further, the passivity can have a negative effect on relationships with their teachers, peers, and advisors (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002) in particular at tertiary level.

## Conclusion

This research is indicative of the challenges the transnational students experience in the exchange of educational spaces with the portability of programmes. Cultural adaptation to the host country's classroom dynamics posed the major drawback. In light of globalisation, and internationalisation in tertiary education this paper demonstrates the ever-emerging cultural impact on education. This study gives insights on student and teacher perspectives which can be useful in facilitating and promoting transnational education. Designing programmes should involve collaboration between curriculum developers from both host and home institutions. These developers should be fully aware of the cultural challenges students encounter during the transition process through these transnational educational spaces. Strategies can now be developed to nurture student experiences in the host country. Teaching strategies to extend classroom success include creating settings that are collaborative and culturally relevant to all ethnicities. In the context of growing numbers of transnational students in New Zealand, commitment to embrace cultural diversity and ethnicity is imperative to continuously assess the polytechnic's ability to form and deliver on partnerships, which will ensure the polytechnic remains a first-choice education destination (Fourie, 2010).

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