

**Lost in Internationalised Space:
The Challenge of Sustaining Academics Teaching Offshore**

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About the Presenter:

As Director of Organisational and Staff Development Services at the University of Western Australia, Shelda Debowski manages institutional support for all organizational and staff development processes for both academic and professional staff. Prior to this, she worked in the Murdoch University Business School where she contributed significantly to the provision of graduate courses internationally. Shelda also has a long history in tertiary education, and has many publications relating to e-learning.

Abstract:

There is increasing pressure on universities to market and present their courses internationally. This approach requires staff to perform effectively in an increasingly diverse setting, often as teachers in offshore programmes. While there is significant pressure to enrich the university funding and student base through internationalization, there needs to be stronger recognition of the impact of these activities on academics, and by implication, on the tangible support which should be provided to such staff. A range of issues are explored, including the development of university policy, reviews of career paths and implications, and the consideration of family-friendly strategies for those who have been absent from home while undertaking teaching offshore.

Lost in Internationalised Space: The Challenge of Sustaining Academics Teaching Offshore

Australian tertiary education has developed an increasingly international orientation with the Federal Government encouraging the exporting of courses and importing of overseas students (Nelson, 2003; Welch, 2002). Universities have generally accepted the need to focus on this market, and to gain increasing access to the eager customers awaiting entrée to Australian expertise and quality education (Howe & Martin, 1998; Pratt & Poole, 1998). However, the move toward exporting education offshore has led to some largely unrecognized consequences on university academic staff. This approach requires staff to perform effectively in an increasingly diverse setting as temporary expatriates overseas. While there is significant pressure to enrich the university funding and student base through internationalization, there needs to be stronger recognition of the impact of these processes on academics and support staff, and by implication, on the supportive infrastructure which should be provided to such staff. This paper explores these issues from two perspectives: the consequential impact of academics teaching in international contexts, and the institutional processes which should be reviewed and enhanced to support these employees.

Teaching Offshore

The role of the typical university academic can be complex indeed. Spanning teaching, research and service to meet university expectations and long-term career development needs requires careful juggling of a myriad of expectations. There is increasing recognition of the impact of these divergent, and often conflicting, expectations on the work performance of many academics. They face the risk of rising stress as they strive to build an effective research profile, gain research grants and external funding, supervise research students, teach their academic programmes and support the university's service needs through internal committee representation and external consultancies and participation in associations (Welch, 2002). Many academics find that compromises are necessary, with some having far-reaching consequences. Traditionally, there was an unwritten message that research was more important than teaching if one had to choose between the two. More recently, the national priorities have emphasised higher quality teaching, encouraging universities to monitor teaching quality and to address poor performance in this area (Nelson, 2003). This has increased the complexity of the work context for many academics, who are under increasing scrutiny in their teaching roles, as well as continuing to maintain and build their research emphases.

Overseas teaching has become an additional, and somewhat onerous, demand on already busy academics. Universities initially commenced the provision of overseas programmes in key areas such as business, education and information technology (Schoorman, 2000; Welch, 2002). With the growth in globalization and an emerging demand for high quality education in many third world countries, there has been a commensurate surge in the range and form of offshore teaching by Australian providers. Various models of teaching can be found across the university sector, including full course delivery at an offshore campus, to a combined face-to-face and flexible delivery option, and e-learning (Allport, 2000; Gillham, 2001; Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez & Mason, 2001). The increasing volatility of the international arena as a result of war, terrorism and health scares is likely to enhance the consideration of this latter option, although it is generally perceived to be less efficacious for a number of reasons. In general, there is strong recognition of the value of Australian academics meeting and interacting with the offshore student population. While some programmes rely on moderation visits, where the academic checks the standards of local teachers, and monitors the overall quality of assessment, it is generally recognized that regular teaching by Australian academics significantly enriches the local programme. This is particularly so when it is recognized that universities generally send their more experienced senior teachers to teach offshore. Overseas customers highly regard those who have doctorates, or who hold the title of "professor" or "associate professor". This has led to a significant use of senior academics in the provision of offshore curricula.

Australian academics provide a number of benefits to the offshore programme when they teach on location. The course of study benefits from experienced teachers who are experts in their field, and demonstrate high level teaching skills. They are knowledgeable in the curriculum area, and also may be researching and publishing in the field. In addition, they can be flexible in adapting the programme to suit the student needs, rather than slavishly adhering to a structured and stipulated programme of study set by the course managers. Further, they ensure the standards in that location parallel those required of students in similar programmes in Australia. These academics also offer strong models to local teachers, who may have limited understanding of pedagogical concerns and content knowledge. As such, they serve as exemplars and mentors for those who wish to learn better models of Western instructional guidance. Thus, the university and the overseas nation profit in both explicit and implicit ways from the involvement of academics offshore.

Teaching overseas students in their own home location demands much of university personnel. Travel to Asian countries frequently requires a full day's journeying, and sometimes longer, particularly as courses blossom in Vietnam, China and the Phillipines. Many graduate programmes operate as weekend offerings to increase their popularity with busy executives, with some courses spanning several alternate weekends. To ensure the utmost is gained from the visiting academic, teaching may be very intensive, extending up to ten hours per day over those weekends. The academic is a key resource throughout the formal teaching days, continuing to provide individualized guidance and support at lunch and tea breaks. Hospitable students may also host dinner with their teachers, leading to very long and intensive days for the academic. Those who teach in courses which offer instruction via another language must also deal with the challenges of teaching through a translator. A common pattern for many academics is to fly the day prior to the teaching commitment, teach, and then return to Australia to commence the normal work roles which await their return. Thus, the demands of this form of teaching are significant, ranging from high cognitive load, high physical demands, low recreational opportunity, and high emotional load, due to the loss of personal support networks. Many perform these roles as work overloads, to ensure their home universities do not lose their teaching expertise in the Australian university location. While this provides some additional income, it greatly increases the load and demands on the academic. This is exacerbated by the demands associated with teaching large offshore classes (Toth & Montagna, 2002), and the additional assessment demands placed on the academic.

There are also costs in terms of curriculum development and quality (Welch, 2002). Spontaneity and flexibility may be less achievable in offshore teaching, due to the limited support and facilities to be found in many local settings. Photocopying and secretarial support may not be found in-house – particularly on weekends, and can prove prohibitively expensive if obtained externally. These conditions necessitate a more structured and regulated teaching style to that often adopted by university teachers, who seek to work in a responsive and adaptive manner to the student's learning needs. Additionally, those working in an alternative language are even further restricted, as they must ensure all materials are prepared well ahead of time to enable accurate translation of any resources. Many universities teach in hotel settings, with rooms not designed for educational purposes. In China, for example, many courses are taught in long, narrow hotel function rooms, which reduce the capacity to shift furniture and integrate students in close and restricted layouts. Thus, academics need to design their courses and anticipate likely learning experiences well in advance, to ensure that the learning experience is a successful and integrated approach.

Many successful offshore programmes are taught asynchronously across a range of locations or in one location by different instructors. For example, three academics were involved in teaching Murdoch University's Human Resource Management unit in the Chinese MBA to six different cohorts in one location over a single year, and in three different locations that same year. To ensure uniform quality and cost-efficient production of support materials, different academics need to work closely to develop common curricula and associated resources. They need to develop good teamwork skills, and to build strong strategies for unit quality control and

communication of issues. Moderation across the various groups also needs to be carefully monitored to ensure students are equitably managed, and are exposed to the same expectations, regardless of the teacher. Students need to be assured that they are all working to the same standards to achieve the same outcomes, and that they are being provided with a high quality learning experience through their association with the university.

E-learning is another area in which the offshore teacher needs to become proficient. While it cannot be assumed that every student has ready access to the internet and thus, access to the e-learning support network provided by the university, there is an increasing expectation that offshore teaching will encompass both face-to-face and electronic guidance through the curriculum. The benefits of this level of support are major, including the capacity to provide electronic resources and support, online tutorials and other forms of interim guidance while the teacher is back in Australia. The increasing use of flexible delivery approaches is gaining additional support, particularly in the light of the recent SARS scare and acts of terrorism. Recently, offshore teachers with e-learning backup were well rewarded when they were barred from traveling overseas. The presence of an e-learning environment was a very valuable selling point during that troubled period. Those without use of the adjunct support of an e-learning curriculum were left without any means of supporting student learning. Thus, offshore teachers also need to build electronic support into their programmes, so that their students can gain a stable, richer and more encompassing learning experience. This also comes with a price for the teacher, however, who needs to spend time working with the software to package the learning materials, and to design additional interactive learning opportunities (Holt & Thompson, 1998). Additional skills in conducting online tutorials, designing quizzes and constructing effective learning opportunities also need to be developed. Thus, the integration of e-learning is also another additional demand on the offshore teacher.

Offshore students also need to be challenged to learn in different ways. The pedagogy which underpins western style instruction can be very different to that encountered in localized Asian educational settings (McLoughlin, 2001; Pincas, 2001). Rote learning and an expectation that "there is only one right answer" can reduce the capacity of students to build many of the strong associative and lateral responses which are expected of Australian students. The classroom interactions may also need to be developed in different ways. Students in China, for example, will respectfully defer to those with higher status in the student group. This can impact strongly on the quality of interactions and risk-taking which occurs in class activities. Those aiming to teach similar programmes to those operating in Australia need to recognize these challenges, and to plan for the teaching of reflective and synergistic learning. An academic may, for example, find it challenging to repetitively encourage students to view the textbook as a signpost rather than the font of all knowledge. This can require significant reinforcement and modeling before change is evident. The newly forged patterns can also revert to traditional practices unless every instructor reinforces these principles. This has implications for university policy and teaching philosophies, as well as team and course management.

There are additional academic roles which may need to be assumed as a programme is developed for overseas provision. The course coordinator role is a significant dual role: focusing on customer service and quality control. As the key contact for both students and offshore partners or associates, this individual needs to be able to respond rapidly and effectively to queries, complaints or issues. A sound knowledge of corporate governance issues (in terms of university policy and principles) must be maintained, and regular communication with university stakeholders should be ensured, particularly where issues or concerns have arisen. As the public face of the programme, the coordinator needs to demonstrate a good customer service orientation, and should be proficient in networking, marketing and maintaining effective relationships with external partners and students. These competencies take time to develop and to maintain, and may require significant time commitment on a regular basis. The management of emails, telephone linkages and offshore meetings are all part of the core business of an offshore course coordinator.

Course moderators also face demands which are often hidden (Fitz-Gerald & Leary, 2000). Moderators aim to monitor the quality of the programmes presented offshore – particularly where the instructors are local teachers, rather than university staff. In these situations, a moderator may be asked to prepare examination papers and other assessments; co-mark papers to check that the local instructors are marking appropriately; monitor sample classes of the instructors; model class teaching to guide those same instructors; prepare course guidelines and model answers for sessions. This is a more arduous role than that undertaken by course coordinators of Australian-based programmes, as it includes the additional loads of traveling to moderate, monitoring emails and managing other tasks to ensure effective connectedness between all course parties.

To ensure offshore units are of high quality, universities need to develop a range of strategies to build and maintain similar standards to those which are espoused within the Australian curriculum (Biggs, 2001). First, they need to clearly and transparently articulate the underlying curriculum philosophy and practices. Teaching teams need to spend time identifying the strategies to be employed in encouraging more reflective and interactive learning. There may be a need to structure a range of learning opportunities for each teaching topic, so that instructors have the flexibility to adapt around the local learning community needs, whilst still reflecting the overall standards established by the Australian host university. Assessments need to be moderated to uphold standards, and materials need to be updated on a regular basis to ensure their relevance and accuracy in a rapidly evolving educational context. Databanks of assessments and activities may also need to be developed and constantly enhanced to maintain their suitability as assessment tools. Thus, the curriculum management and consultation processes are critical in providing high quality teaching offshore.

These expectations, along with the associated demands of traveling, presenting and maintaining existing university commitments, place onerous loads on academics involved in sustaining an offshore presence. The initial excitement of traveling and seeing exotic locations is soon replaced by a realization that the trips are basically global commuting, offering little in the way of social or emotional value to the individual. In fact, the disruption to personal lifestyles is significant, and possibly costly if children need to be cared for whilst the academic is absent. In terms of work-life balance, an increasingly recognized need (Polach, 2003), this form of work is a high cost activity, as it deprives the participant of family time and professional opportunity.

Another cost to the academic when conducting overseas teaching is the reduced capacity to participate in the local home university. The time and energy required to sustain the overseas connection and quality detract from the local contributions and networks which should also be maintained. Time away can impact on attendance at critical meetings and university activities, reducing the integration of the academic into the university life and decision processes. This can lead to a sense of alienation and disconnection which may strongly impact on work commitment and performance (Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003).

Loss of opportunity costs may also extend to the research activities of the academic. The time spent traveling and managing the teaching roles are lost opportunities to research. While e-mail enables some continuing communication, there is little time to spend on research and related activities. This can lead to regular periods of disconnectedness which may extend to longer periods of lost time as the academic attempts to address the backlog of tasks and work which accrued during that offshore period. Academics at Murdoch University's Business School estimated a further week was lost in these accrual processes after each five day trip offshore. Comparisons of Australian business schools' productivity with other university schools of similar size and concentration might reveal a reduced level of research activity directly attributable to offshore involvement and high teaching activity. This directly affects the school's capacity to compete for university research funds, and also reduces the research reputation of the school compared to others in the university. While it could be argued that offshore teaching has played a significant part in this reduced research capacity, there is little widespread recognition of this causal pattern. Instead, business academics may simply be regarded as "lesser researchers"

who are not as committed to the process. This can be quite disheartening for those who are struggling to further their research career, despite the offshore commitments. The impact of loss of productivity is particularly strongly felt when universities evaluate research performance across a university context, rather than recognizing the specific work conditions operating within a particular school environment. The loss of effectiveness may also extend to the research supervision relationships which must operate around the academic's extended and frequent absences. These must also be handled carefully, with the impacts being discussed with the student and co-supervisors. Schools with a significant presence in the overseas market may need to consider how they might protect research students from this loss of support through the use of co-supervision or supervision teams. Other colleagues may also feel the impact of the academic's absence, as core duties, and possibly, teaching, may need to be carried by those who remain behind.

A major challenge facing universities is to ensure academics are willing to travel offshore to teach. While monetary incentives are an initial drawcard, the long-term value diminishes as participants realize there are significant personal and professional impacts (Debowksi, 2002). The attitude within the university toward offshore teaching may play a significant role in determining the willingness of academics to participate in the programme. If they are viewed by other academics as "robbing" the system, because they are "pulling in the money" for very little effort, there is opportunity to generate strong ill-will. Open and fair discussion of the impact of offshore travel needs to be undertaken. Where staff are paid additional income to teach offshore, for example, comparisons might be made with the funds which can be generated through consultancies, with little or no disruption to family or professional commitments. A further issue is the possibility of abuse of staff goodwill. In some universities, new appointees in particular schools are asked to sign contracts which include a commitment to teach offshore. The recompense in either time or money may little reflect the demands this role places on the individual, and can lead to strong employee dissatisfaction or loss of goodwill.

In summary, it is clear that academics require a range of expanded skills to cope effectively with the challenges of working offshore whilst maintaining their presence and performance in their local universities. Whilst these challenges may be discussed amongst those traveling and working in these contexts, they are largely hidden issues in many universities, and may lead to considerable inequities in the treatment of the academics concerned. As the internationalization agenda escalates, these could become significant sources of contention and discrimination, with those associated with offshore provision finding that they are losing ground within the local university context. There needs to be stronger recognition by universities as to their responsibility in addressing these and associated issues, and in reviewing challenging elements of the organizational context. Some key aspects of organizational support are now explored to illustrate the types of issues which need to be publicized and addressed by universities as they expand their international presence.

Organizational Support and Interventions.

Universities have developed a range of supportive mechanisms to support their academics. A key service relates to the provision of developmental opportunities to enable academics to develop new professional competencies. Courses relating to flexible delivery, cross-cultural communication, team building, curriculum design, large group instructional techniques, career and time management would be of benefit to those planning to work in this area. However, while the provision of appropriate and targeted academic development opportunities is an important fundamental support, the uptake of those opportunities is somewhat less predictable. Academics who need to gain access to those services may feel too pressured to participate, and fail to see the key strategic value of obtaining additional guidance. The timing of the programmes may also make it difficult for these staff to attend if they are working offshore as well as teaching within Australia. Thus, there may be a need to identify the programmes which are most beneficial in supporting these strategic ventures, and in providing these in flexible modes of delivery so they are accessible at point of need.

The support of the School Head and / or Executive Dean in encouraging staff to participate in these programmes can be a substantial visible message regarding the importance of the roles, and the need to support those undertaking offshore work. However, this expression of support and recognition of the demands the roles entail needs to be addressed even more substantially by the university. The impact on capacity to conduct research and participate in service roles needs to be considered when career management processes are undertaken. Performance management and promotional processes may need to be reviewed to accommodate the opportunity costs which arise as a result of offshore work. These need to be recognized and mediated through the official leadership channels of the university. In addition, there needs to be recognition of the impact of local conditions and expectations on the performance of academics when they teach offshore. For example, if teaching ratings are lower than those gained while teaching Australian courses, they need to be reviewed in relation to other ratings from similar locations, rather than contrasted with the home university activities. Contextual issues are important to both recognize and accommodate.

In terms of human resource processes within the university setting, the expansion of numbers of staff traveling offshore requires stronger consideration of industrial and safety issues. University-wide policies relating to the support by the university for staff traveling offshore need to be developed (Marginson, 2000). It should be recognized that these have industrial implications, and can lead to significant discussion and debate. The support of university staff while traveling overseas could be considered as a mini form of expatriation, an area which has been well considered by large corporations. In these organizations, there is careful documentation of a number of issues relating to the deployment and support of staff who are working overseas. While these appointments are often of much longer duration, the practices which have been developed provide some useful guidance on the types of issues which should be addressed. An offshore work policy should be developed in consultation with the key stakeholders, which include the academics, union representatives, heads of school, human resource / industrial relations personnel, and executive members of the university (Schoorman, 2000). A range of issues might be considered, such as:

1. If staff are traveling longer than eight hours in a single day, should they travel business class?
2. When staff have spent a weekend away on work related business, should they be entitled to a day's personal leave on their return?
3. Is there a limit on how many courses staff should teach offshore in any given year?
4. Should staff be paid additional monies to teach offshore, or should they be provided with workload reductions and other incentives (e.g. research assistant allowances)?
5. If staff do travel offshore and become ill or injured, how well are they supported in returning home and recuperating?

The increasing likelihood of internationalization within the university sector generates some important issues which should be further considered. The impact of offshore activities on the traditional academic roles needs to be carefully reviewed. Time spent offshore may lead to a reduced capacity to perform effectively onshore. Universities anxious to encourage teaching overseas might find it of value to introduce and monitor measures of productivity and quality to identify the actual impact on quality teaching and research.

Offshore course delivery needs to be well maintained if it is offered in flexible delivery modes (Weigel, 2000). The creation of university e-learning teams which work with the academic course development team can ensure academic expertise is appropriately deployed in a cost effective manner. The involvement of instructional designers would enable the efficient development of high quality learning support. In addition, support staff to handle enquiries and related online interactions could greatly sustain the academics during the provision of offshore programmes. At the least, the development of the initial courseware would be a critical source of assistance to overcommitted academics. While this would require additional resourcing, it sends many significant messages to staff and the offshore market, which monitors the various competing

educators closely. Of course, as a university decides to commit the additional resources to this form of development, it becomes increasingly apparent that offshore teaching is not a cheap exercise, and needs to be seen as a long term investment.

The goal of any good university is to also ensure that the reputation of the university remains intact. A challenge is to balance the drawing in of additional funds from offshore operations with the control of quality at both locations (Van Damme, 2001). The decision to provide offshore teaching needs to be carefully made, with strong recognition of the need to appoint a range of additional support staff to ensure high quality teaching and support. Full time general staff need to offer effective customer support to students studying overseas. Support facilities should be created at the various teaching locations, so that photocopying, clerical and technological support are available to visiting teachers. Associations with significant groups and individuals need to be developed, preferably through the ongoing and regular visits of the academics who are contributing to the programme. The university should also consider how alumni will be managed. The provision of ongoing professional development programmes can be of major value in promoting the image of the university to both alumni and possible students. These strategies all have cost implications which will reduce the profit margin, but increase the university's reputation in that region. Long term, this is the real bottom line that must be cultivated, particularly in Asia where reputation is a major selling point to potential students.

As more universities venture into internationalization in a more substantial manner, there is a need to rationalize the duplication of activity offshore. Given the strong impact of offshore teaching on academic productivity and well-being, there is strong potential for greater cooperation across the university sector. Collaborative programmes, offshore support facilities including office, social networks and inter-university clubs, e-learning networks and library development are quite feasible areas to develop collaboratively. The need to target and strengthen Australia's collective impact, rather than seeking to establish individual university influence could become an increasing concern as an aggressive American tertiary sector seeks to move into Australia's traditional Asian market.

Joint development of new markets would also reduce the risk and load on single universities. While there is evidence of an increasing demarcation between across universities in Australia (GO8s, Innovative universities etc), this is one area where knowledge sharing would be beneficial, particularly across local universities within a particular state. Certainly, it would encourage the building of communities of practice where teaching resources, strategies and facilities might be shared across joint partners. This collaboration would be of value to the academic, who at present, can feel very isolated and unappreciated.

Conclusion

Internationalisation is a key initiative which is growing in popularity across the Australian university sector. With the increased focus on building commercially viable offshore programmes comes the reliance on Australian academics to provide a professional and high quality presence offshore and within their local work arena. However, academics are increasingly noting their workloads and the significant pressures they face in managing the diverse demands from their employers. Participation in offshore teaching, while offering a rich and exciting opportunity to view different cultures, is also a potential source of further disconnectedness and disruption to personal and professional continuity. This paper has suggested that universities need to review how they manage these processes, and their expectations of academics who do contribute offshore. The real impact of offshore teaching is significant, and may lead to a divisive and inequitable influence on career paths, research outcomes and reputation. There is a strong need to build institutional guidelines for the conducting of offshore business, and to ensure that staff are well supported while on their home ground and while flying the flag overseas.

Internationalisation offers many opportunities for the development of new markets. However, there has to be a strong emphasis on sustaining and preserving the critical human resources on which this industry is so reliant.

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