

17th IDP Australian International Education Conference
21 – 24 October 2003, Melbourne, Australia

Paper Title: **Towards Best Practice in International Education: Staff Training and Professional Development**

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Abstract

For some years, professional development programs for staff working in international education have been *ad hoc* and intermittent. In reality, practitioners frequently have little or no preparation or training support for their particular and complex work. While there are a few academic programs, by and large the demand for practical skills training has been unmet. *Isana: International Education Association* has been delivering specialised professional development nationally, as well as in New Zealand. The organisation is now moving towards the creation of a standard curriculum suitable at several levels of expertise, and across all educational sectors. During 2003 this work has been made possible through membership input and Australian government support. Further developments will continue to address best practice and relevant competencies, responsive to government strategy, and institutional interests.

Introduction

*In meeting the goal of excellence to which all universities aspire, the development of their key resource, their staff, is a major issue. Provisions made for the support for new staff, staff appraisal, feedback, encouragement and opportunities for all staff to improve, is an especially relevant benchmarking issue.*¹

This statement introduces the benchmarks for career development and staff effectiveness in a manual for Australian universities published in 1999. Implicit is that staff effectiveness is dependent on regular and critical reviews of skills and knowledge, along with the application of key competencies in particular work settings. In international education this demands a responsibility to continuously improve professional standards, identify performance indicators, and responsiveness by institutions to changing staff roles.

¹ McKinnon, K., Walker, S., Davis, D. (1999) Benchmarking: a manual for Australian Universities Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra. p.139

It would be fair to say that most professional staff in international education come into the field through a range of professional pathways, some of these not directly connected to education, such as marketing, business management and specialist areas such as counselling. This observation highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the industry, as we have come to define it. It also indicates the richness of the experience many of our staff bring to their positions. One recent 'snapshot' survey of ISANA workshop participants revealed backgrounds in psychology, theology, public relations, office management, social work, international business and tourism management. Such professional mobility is probably adding to our collective competency in a general way, and individuals with these backgrounds can certainly perform at a high level.

The professional backgrounds we bring to international education generally equip us, to some degree, with a framework and knowledge to use in our roles, with a great deal learnt the workplace. This workplace experience is invaluable, as there is little specific training for the complex roles many of us perform. Only one of the survey respondents reported formal study towards a degree in international education. One declared he was 'deprived of professional development!'

Some academic courses do address aspects of international education within historical, cultural and managerial frameworks, and there are courses which incorporate international education components. But as long as there is a lack of formal competency training, we will continue to employ staff, for example in international student services, with only vaguely connected credentials and experience.

This leads to a situation where we expect our staff, relying on previous experience, to perform outside their professional disciplines, and perhaps beyond their capacity. Generally, we do not insist that academic staff undertake professional development which addresses cross-cultural teaching practice.

However they are often called upon for a number of non-academic functions, indicating that work international education is multidisciplinary and operates 'horizontally' across institutions. In schools, our registrars often shoulder additional responsibility for international student welfare. Student services staff in faculties are frequently required to 'interpret' sensitive student issues for students.

All of us in some way are affected by the experience of international students. This is significant when we reflect on our constantly changing work environment, rising student enrolments, the diversity of student cohorts, and our obligations under regulations. Considering this, it is disturbing how little formal training we actually have in specific areas, and how under-committed we appear to be in this regard.

We need to challenge the 'anyone can do it' approach. In such professions such as teaching, or medicine, we would not, and should not employ people with responsibility, who do not already have relevant credentials in their field. In a 'new' and rapidly growing dimension of education in Australia, we can expect professionalisation to be an evolving process, but we need to be mindful of the implications of having inadequately regulated or inappropriately prepared practitioners.

Specifically, how confident are we that our students benefit from accurate, well-informed advice, appropriate teaching approaches, and effectively conceived and managed support programs?

I suggest that we **must** offer practitioners in international education targeted training and support, to fulfill our duty of care to students—thus maintaining the integrity of the student program. The skills and knowledge required must be seriously considered and opportunities to acquire key competencies must be central to employment policy.

Professional development needs

Over a number of years ISANA has surveyed its members and conference participants, finding strong expressions of interest in specific, competency-based training for practice in areas of student support, advisory services, program development, and cross-cultural classroom strategies. In these surveys the complex nature of academic, counselling and advisory roles indicated high levels of responsibility for student welfare, matched with concern about staff support and resources.

In 1997 Rena Kelly at Deakin University published results of her survey which showed that there was support for formal training in international education, both at post-graduate diploma level and in competencies related to the field.² What was interesting about this survey was the number of areas and practical skills considered to be important. These ranged from cultural-specific knowledge, to working with government agencies, through to marketing international education. While a fairly small sample, the breadth of issues reflected challenges faced by people whose background credentials may lag behind the demand of international education today.

Tom Whalley in British Columbia, also in 1997, linked principles of best practice in internationalisation with the responsibilities institutions have to support relevant professional development.³ His guidelines were specific, and may provide us with a model of professional development objectives. These include:

- opportunities to develop skills and knowledge, including opportunities at home and overseas,
- the promotion of awareness activities which foster positive attitudes towards internationalisation, and
- a recognition that internationalisation is 'holistic' and involves the integration of international perspectives throughout curriculum, program and advisory practices.

It is this third point which needs to be addressed in a professional development and training strategy. International education reaches across all areas of institutions and also across sectors. For example there are common issues affecting international students in transition from schools through the universities and into post-graduate study. Our capacity to address service provision, consistency of support and understanding of the student experience at all educational levels is critical to achieving quality outcomes. Practical strategies are needed, to formulate a transportable, national program of training and staff development.

² Kelly, R. (1997) Training for International and Intercultural Competencies: Meeting the Needs of Australian International Educators. Paper presented at the 8th ISANA Conference, Melbourne.

³ Whalley, T. (1997) Best Practice Guidelines for Internationalisation of the Curriculum. Ministry of Education, Skills and Training & the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology. Province of British Columbia.

What specialist skills and knowledge are needed?

Thinking about our own positions, we might consider the variety of tasks we have performed during the past week, and examine how broad our roles actually are.

In any normal day, international student advisors, for example, need to be accomplished in a multitude of advisory, programmatic and administrative tasks, including producing publicity for their services, processing student work rights applications, office management, client services and managing major events.

It is not uncommon for senior managers to be asked to intervene in a critical incident involving a student death. Such involvement would require a familiarity with the institution's critical incident policy, administrative procedures, staff support management, and skills in dealing with cultural issues.

After September 11 2001, staff located across our universities—not only exchange and education abroad staff—found themselves dealing with grieving students, indicating that institution-wide responses are needed.

We cannot always expect employees to respond appropriately, or take responsibility when such matters arise. Even with clear position descriptions, can we reasonably expect new staff to have an understanding of international education, *and* proficiency in relevant skills, at the commencement of their employment? Such a situation supports an argument for concurrent and relevant training opportunities.

So, what training is needed? To place this question in a real life context, consider this case:

A student is distressed after failing a major core subject in his degree. After seeking help from student advisors, counselors and academic teachers, he is still despondent and withdraws temporarily from his course. Upon his return he finds he has lost the continuity of his studies, and friends, and his student advisor is now working elsewhere. He cannot face his family with such failure, and, after a time, takes his life. The university responds appropriately, and with compassion, and provides immediate support to his family and friends.

Thinking about some of the staff responsibilities and functions involved before, during and after a critical incident, I have listed the following:

- ethical marketing-fitting students and courses
- providing advice on English language preparation and cultural adjustment
- academic advising in cross cultural settings
- providing accurate advice relating to visa compliance and repeating failed units
- understanding regulations governing leave of absence
- student case management
- professional networking
- program development to train students in stress management
- critical incident management
- liaison with external groups, police, hospitals etc
- risk assessment and minimisation strategies

- staff support and grief counseling
- procedures for repatriation
- administrative procedures for deceased students
- management of media enquiries
- deployment of staff for family liaison
- critical incident reporting
- policy development
- debriefing and ongoing staff training

Such a student case as this will be recognised by many of us, but there are ordinary circumstances affecting thousands of students where we need excellent judgement, sensitivity, authority to act, and knowledge of the context and issues. In our general work in international education such competencies as those listed above might be needed by many professionals.

Modelling professional development

An analysis of competencies needed in international education was undertaken this year by ISANA with support from AEI. The exercise involved data gathering from a number of sources, including professional associations, and the result is represented as a 'competency matrix'. This matrix provides us with a basis for planning formal and sequential training programs that apply to professional roles in international education.⁴ We have identified, in a first attempt, 61 competencies across a range of professional domains. The matrix is interesting in the sense that it clearly demonstrates the breadth of the field, and the extent of the skills considered important in traditional roles in our institutions. Further developments will see discussion about such areas as off-shore student services, and performance evaluation.

The next stage of the ISANA project is to explore ways such competencies might be delivered through formal training programs, and to deliver these progressively through 2004. We are interested in discussing staff training needs with universities and schools through a consultation process. ISANA has begun the process to register programs through the Australian Qualifications Framework, with the aim to eventually offer certified courses. It is envisaged that other groups will be involved in this development, as well as in program delivery. By the end of November 2003 the formal program structure will be established, with a new professional development entity created under ISANA management.

ISANA's strategic position

Strategically ISANA is in a fine position to move forward in this area. ISANA represents practitioners in international education, including academic, administrative, managerial and other specific professional roles. Many of these people are trainers in our programs. Its constituency covers all educational sectors, from higher education through to schools and ELICOS providers. It is this reach which distinguishes it from many organisations whose representation is more role-, or sector-specific. We are seeing increasing interest by academics and researchers, and will be offering refereed papers for the first time at the 2004 annual conference.

⁴ A similar exercise was conducted by Jan Hollway, Tertiary Development Officer, Education New Zealand, and supported by the ISANA New Zealand branch, in 2003.

ISANA as a professional association is unique in Australia, in that its focus is international education, and this aligns it with the missions of organisations such as NAFSA, EAIE and UKCOSA, albeit with a distinctly Australian agenda. It was the training programs of these organisations that informed some of ISANA's early professional development work. The particular Australian context has been addressed in the development of ISANA activities to date; with an essential focus on the level of quality service and support for international students, the competencies of staff working with these students, and the sharing of information with regulatory and associated bodies.

Our capacity to grow is considerable. ISANA membership is now some 400, many occupying key, senior positions in our institutions. It is worth noting that this is as a voluntary organisation, with no continuous institutional support, nor ongoing external funding. The strength of its membership is in dedication and active contribution to the organisation's mission, as well as adherence to the ISANA Code of Ethical Practice.

ISANA's current professional development program includes focused workshops and contributions to programs facilitated by other groups, such as the Association of Tertiary Education Managers. The *Foundations of International Education* program, a one day introduction to international education, has been delivered in 3 states and in New Zealand in the past 10 months. More than 130 participants have completed this program, and there is strong demand for further delivery. The 14th ISANA Annual Conference was held in October and all branches are active in offering professional development activities.

ISANA is also distinct in Australia as an association open to staff at all levels of all education sectors. It is its membership base, and broad representation that makes it an effective and informed voice in monitoring, advising, supporting and advocating for quality in international education. Because of its student focus, ISANA is in the fortunate position of having key support from peak bodies such as the National Liaison Committee for International Students, and associated student groups.

We argue that we can objectively comment on current government policy as it relates to recruitment and services to overseas students. External to universities and schools, we are also active advocates of relationships across the industry. For example, over the past two years the Victorian branch of ISANA has been part of a working group with DIMIA that looks at clarification and impact of visa changes. It was the Victorian branch of ISANA that developed, with DIMIA in Melbourne, a user friendly version of the student visa application checklist in 2001. In the future, we are hoping to offer ISANA input into training of frontline DIMIA staff dealing with student enquiries.

Finally, in view of Australia's growth in international education, and our aspirations to offer world class programs and services, we must ensure that our advice and service to students is informed and accurate. We must offer career pathways, and incentives for people to remain in key positions. We must set benchmarks for expertise and knowledge for staff we employ. The professionalisation of staff, the identification and recognition of specific key roles, resourcing of staff development programs and maintenance of policy in this area are essential components of successful internationalisation.

