

Internationalisation and Academic Staff at University of South Australia.

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Abstract

This paper is about internationalisation at the University of South Australia (UniSA) and staff support programs. The paper outlines some of the issues faced by staff when delivering programs to international students both onshore and offshore. As well, I discuss a number of strategies that are being extended at UniSA to strengthen the professional development opportunities for staff. I also raise issues in regards to both strengths and weaknesses of professional development programs and look towards additional programs the university plans to bring to its program of staff support in the area of internationalisation.

Introduction

The University of South Australia currently extends across six campuses situated in CBD, urban and regional South Australia. City West and City East are in the CBD, Mawson Lakes, Magill and Underdale extend across east, west and near northern urban localities, and Whyalla is a large regional centre some 400 kilometres to the north of Adelaide.

The University encourages critical thinking and scholarship based on self-directed learning. Students are encouraged to become effective seekers of knowledge, as much as effective workers in whatever particular industry or area they have chosen to study. In terms of flexible delivery the University acknowledges the need for wider participation in higher education and caters for the needs of a highly diverse student body encompassing domestic, international, special needs and disadvantaged groups. The University badges itself as both a university of equity as well as an international organisation.

UniSA's teaching and learning focus is based around the concepts of student centred learning, flexible delivery and a set of Graduate Qualities. Within this range of qualities, it is expected that graduates

1. Will operate effectively with and upon a body of knowledge
2. Are prepared for lifelong learning
3. Are effective problem solvers
4. Can work autonomously and collaboratively
5. Are committed to ethical action and social responsibility
6. Communicate effectively
7. Demonstrate an international perspective

The focus of this paper is most heavily upon Graduate Quality 7 and its significance for the processes of internationalisation at the University.

Graduate Quality 7 is a crucial factor in both international and domestic student outcomes. It is especially crucial for 'domestic' students should they need to travel and work among other cultures, and it is important for our approach to understanding the needs of international students who choose to study with UniSA. Consequently,

it has become part of university policy that academic staff integrate cultural understanding and trans-cultural student interaction across their curriculum design and their teaching and learning processes.

Academic staff are encouraged to understand their diverse student cohort as a resource, as well as developing their own understanding of themselves as international citizens. This factor is especially important for the many staff – who are born in Australia as well as those who come from other countries – who teach at home to a broad audience and then travel overseas at the visitor delivering Australian education to a non-Australian, but singularly language based audience. Hence awareness of matters relating to working across and within cultures becomes central to teaching and learning.

To give some further idea of the importance of internationalised programs within this organisation, it is useful to look at the current (mid-semester) 2003 student profile.

Total Enrolment:	32,800
'Domestic' students	
On shore	22,663
Off shore	8
International students	
On shore	2,995
Off shore	7,134

Some examples of student origin profile – on shore and offshore programs:

Hong Kong, PRC, Singapore	6680	
Malaysia		589
India, Pakistan, Bangladesh	297	
Thailand		271
Scandinavia		172
Eastern Europe (various countries)	157	
Indonesia		107
Korea		59
Japan		54
Africa (various countries)		36

There are a total of 79 countries represented by our International students.

The Issues

Obviously such diversity brings with it added issues for effective teaching and learning in terms of trans-cultural delivery. Increasingly our Adelaide-based academic staff are teaching programs not only at home campuses but offshore in the region. The impact of the changes in the student cohort is varied, but in terms of teaching and learning, can be encapsulated into three main issues:

- New teaching needs
- Understanding internationalisation as an on-going process
- Workload

New teaching needs centre around the development of skills which account for a much more diverse set of learning styles and pedagogical background among students. Staff must now think about how to reach all their students on many differing levels of learning. In terms of language, there are differences among students in capability and comprehension, as well as writing and reading styles. Good teaching should also assist students to conform to the conventions of essay and report structures that include aspects of referencing and citation. Critical analysis and argument form much of the requirements in both written and spoken work and such skills must often be taught where students have developed their learning based on different pedagogical requirements. As well, academics need to go beyond content to help students develop both confidence and skill in oral presentations – an issue often especially confronting for the ESL speaker.

Learning within Australian universities is heavily based on tutorials, practical work and project-based assignments. Group work, oral presentations and self-directed learning through projects develop many necessary graduate qualities. Group work forms an essential component of learning, as it develops the graduate's skills in teamwork and communication. Hence, staff skills must encompass the negotiations inherent in assisting students to form appropriate and meaningful learning and project groups, even when there might be a measure of reluctance among students to be involved in such situations.

Internationalisation as an issue for staff is often viewed as a simple, singular occurrence. While this view might arise from the University situating itself as an international organisation, it is, however, an on-going process that requires the academic to situate themselves as international too – especially given their frequent journeying abroad to deliver programs in situations where they become the 'international' participant. The result has been a need for teaching staff to adopt a preparedness to understand, and to be the bridge across which learning may travel in both directions.

Workload remains a contentious issue at all universities, but given their new and developing teaching needs, the impact on staff workload has been substantial. Preparing curriculum and teaching materials that account for even a few of the issues in trans-cultural learning I have outlined above, takes considerable effort and a great deal of time. The consequent resistance to change is understandable. In addition, the journeys off shore – from initial enthusiasm to realisation of the added workload, take a toll on attitudes and teaching effectiveness.

Supporting Academic Staff

There are various strategies UniSA have put into place to assist staff work through the various impacts arising from the changed teaching and learning requirements. UniSA has promoted internationalisation within policy, curriculum and teaching practices through a range of professional development strategies. Briefly, in terms of policy, this encompasses mission statements, goals and administration systems (providing structures and assistance, etc.).

Service delivery is a major component of internationalisation practice. Services are available to both staff and students through a division known as 'Learning Connection' with offices located at all campuses. As an organisation within the wider University, Learning Connection comprises a number of related service providers: for students these cover learning advisers – for both domestic and international students, counsellors, employment assistance, on-line advisers, study skills developers, research education and language assistance.

For staff, Learning Connection provides professional development through a number of discipline-based and Uni-wide programs written into annual 'service agreements' with each of the discipline based divisions. These programs encompass on-line and IT skills development, supervision education, trans-cultural teaching, assessment and feedback practices, skill development programs and a Teaching at UniSA program for newly arriving staff. The majority of professional development staff at UniSA have academic teaching backgrounds themselves and relate on a practical basis to the issues faced by the staff they work with.

Specific to internationalisation, professional development staff run workshops that focus on internationalising the curriculum and teaching and learning across cultures. They also create dialogue among staff around issues relating to what it means to operate within a trans-cultural situation. General staff (administrative) can also access workshops on issues around working with newly arrived international students, and how to assist ESL and other overseas students when arriving at front desks and requiring help.

In the on-line medium, Learning Connection has developed, and continues to develop, online resources that are accessible to all staff. Additionally there are professional developers whose expertise lies in online facilitation of curriculum and teaching resources. These professionals assist staff to develop pedagogically appropriate materials for on-line access by students based both in Australian and overseas.

A new professional development initiative pioneered at the beginning of 2003 is the Teaching at UniSA Program made available to all new contract and continuing academic staff, as well as a number of the sessional (hourly paid) tutors and lecturers. The aim of this program is to introduce staff to the teaching and learning issues deemed as high priority at the University – modules include flexible delivery, teaching and learning across cultures, interesting and effective teaching strategies, assessment issues and on-line teaching. All the modules work strongly on the ideals that reflective practice should form the basis of sound teaching and learning practices.

Learning Connection acknowledges that there are some weaknesses in the professional development Internationalisation program – for example, workshops are a good means of delivering ideas to a large audience, but staff need to attend for this to happen. Given workloads and spread across campuses, attendance cannot be guaranteed, and it is difficult to make workshops mandatory without creating unnecessary resistance and negative attitudes. Online learning is a sound medium of development, however it takes time and extensive promotion to raise awareness of what is available and the value of accessing and using the material.

I mentioned in my introduction that we are also looking towards future professional development with an internationalisation perspective. Several plans are 'on the drawing board' that take into account requests staff have made in their evaluation of our programs. In one area, we plan to deliver workshops that are more highly contextualised in terms of discipline area. While there has been success in discipline-generic delivery, staff are particularly concerned about unpacking and developing trans-cultural teaching and learning strategies that relate directly to a particular subject. While we acknowledge staff needs in this area, we will continue to offer generic programs as each type has its advantages and disadvantages.

Within the Teaching at UniSA program, beyond its extension to reach more sessional staff based on campuses here in South Australia, it is also planned that the program

will be taken offshore to include participation among overseas staff who are employed in the various countries where students are based. We are also examining some of the factors that could encourage a semi-formal peer mentoring system specifically for staff going to teach offshore and who could assist each other in both their teaching and enculturation issues.

Finally, research continues to be an important part of professional development. As well as undertaking our own research, professional developers will encourage research into working, teaching and learning across cultures. We encourage staff who do it well to teach others as part of the peer learning structures. This University offers a number of teaching and learning grants and is particularly keen to encourage research into areas around internationalisation of the curriculum. While there are kits and teaching guides currently available online, new resources arising out of research and investigation are constantly being developed. Currently these include a desk top 'strategies' booklet and an audit tool for assisting staff to provide effective and appropriate feedback to students.

It has not been possible in the time available to outline all the strategies this University has put in place to assist staff deal with the impact of internationalisation. Nor would I be able to talk through either all the failures we have had and even less the successes! However, I hope this has given you some ideas to think about, and that I have been able to indicate that staff support is regarded as an integral and on-going factor in considering the impact of internationalisation on the University.