Theme: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO QA AND THEIR IMPACT ON EFFICIENCY, EFFECTIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

Title: **Quality Assuring Transnational Education: The Malaysian Experience**

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Abstract:

Transnational education (TNE) is not anomalous to Malaysia, as forms of TNE existed as early as the 1950s to meet the demands for tertiary education. Many of these early TNE qualifications were linked to skills and business related professional qualifications, and were predominantly British such as Pitman, London Chambers of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), and the Association of Business Executive (ABE). Today the topography of TNE is diverse as it encompasses the early forms of TNE arrangements, twinning and 3+0 arrangements, branch campuses and multi-varsity concept. These arrangements raise questions, such as, who is responsible for the quality, and whose quality benchmark is applicable. This paper draws examples from the National Accreditation Board and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency's collective experience of 11 years to how quality of twinning and 3+0 are assured. It will provide some recommendations towards the efficient and effective adoption of quality policies and processes to sustain and enhance quality TNE in Malaysia and in the process recommend some changes to existing TNE policies.

Introduction

In global economy, internationalisation is an increasingly important factor in the work of universities and other higher education providers. IDP Education Australia estimates that in 2010, the number of international students seeking education in or from a foreign country will reach 1.4 million (Blight, 1995). Internationalisation of higher education is understood as the concept and the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the higher education institution (De Wit, 1999). One of the more significant forms of internationalisation is transnational education (Scott, 1998). Transnational education (TNE) involves among others, cross border movement of qualifications, students, staff and even institutions. Thus quality assurance of TNE involves quality assuring qualifications, students, staff and institutions. A general search of the TNE literature shows six categories of TNE in higher education and these are as synthesised by Knight (2005); virtual universities, branch campus, independent institution, acquisition and mergers, study centre or teaching sites, and affiliation or networks. As this concept becomes more widely understood and the process of internationalisation matures, it is increasingly urgent that the policies be addressed and reviewed especially by quality assurance agencies, such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and the policy makers, such as the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).

Malaysia has always hosted some form of TNE from her inception as a nation in 1957. In the initial post independent days, these forms of TNE arrangements were limited to skills and business related professional qualifications, and were predominantly British such as Pitman, London Chambers of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) and the Association of Business Executive (ABE) due to the historical linkages. These qualifications were offered by Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), which were set up to meet the demand for tertiary education (Rahimah (1998); Tan (2002)). In the early days the PHEIs provided tuition support for students registered for externally set examinations leading to Certificates, Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas. Today, a large proportion of TNE arrangements are still located in the private sector while a few in the public sector, such as the TNE arrangement between the National University of Malaysia and University Duisburg-Essen, Germany. For this reason, the study is mainly placed within the private higher education sector.

In the mid 1980s the PHEIs offered twinning programmes where students may start their undergraduate studies in Malaysia and complete their degree in the awarding country. Soon with the economic down turn of 1997/8, the need to cap the outflow of currency (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004) and Malaysia's vision of becoming the

regional hub for education, the Government began loosening control over private education allowing other types of TNE arrangements to formalise.

A survey of the types of TNE arrangements in Malaysia show the development of a newer, mutated form of TNE arrangement other than those identified by Knight (2005). Whilst some may have placed the limit of such mutation to the branch campuses (Morshidi, u.d.) it would seem that the multi-varsity concept developed at the Iskandar Corridor, Johore, pushes the boundaries of TNE in Malaysia. The multi varsity concept or to this author the 'Boutique University' is a unique inception by the Malaysian authorities in bringing the best of the best to Malaysian shores. The concept works on the basis that the day to day logistical support facilities are managed by the IC authorities whilst academic matters are in the hands of the faculties concerned. The rationale for the project as indicated by the Iskandar Corridor (IC) authorities is to cater for the identified industrial needs such as financial services, healthcare, tourism and logistics. One faculty with the approval to commence is the Faculty of Medicine, University of Newcastle, UK. Based on this latest development, there are at least seven different types of TNE arrangements in the country. Of these seven, this paper shall limit the discussion to twinning and 3+0 (abridged to include 4+0) TNE arrangements, to facilitate an in-depth discussion of the related TNE policies. However some references are made to other forms of TNE arrangements where it is deemed relevant and appropriate either as a comparison or to clarify a point made.

As indicated in the initial paragraph, issues pertaining to the quality assurance of these TNE arrangements are becoming urgent and necessary. In relations to TNE programmes, the question is just not about quality assuring a programme, but more often it is a question of whose benchmark applies, given the cultural variations between the host country (in this case Malaysia) and the home country (more often it is the United Kingdom, United States or Australia).

Methodology

This study reviews policies and practices of the National Accreditation Board (LAN), the MoHE (pre 2004 – The Ministry of Education) and more recently the MQA using documentary search and case studies. These include documents from the MoHE, LAN and MQA. The Study employs interviews as the tool to gather views on the policies that impact quality of TNE arrangements in Malaysia. These involve eight officers from the LAN/MQA, MoHE, PHEIs and a country TNE manager. Whilst interviews and selection of PHEIs involved officers from all types of TNE arrangements in the country, the discussion shall be limited to policies and applications of policies in twinning and 3+0 TNE arrangements due to the constraints of this paper. Specific findings from other forms of TNE arrangements will only be discussed for the reasons

indicated above. This discussion will specifically exclude vocational TNE arrangements such as the UK's Higher National Diploma (HND) qualifications.

The interviews were conducted between September 2008 and March 2008 in and around the Klang Valley, whilst the documentary search began as early as July 2008. The respondents are identified as Respondents 1 – 8 as some did not want to be identified by name and institution and had agreed to the interview on condition of anonymity.

The Policies

An overview of policies affecting TNE shows that most policies are very generic and applies across all types of arrangements. There are however some that are very specific such as the HND programmes policies which will not be discussed in this paper. All policies are in the national language and for the purposes of this study the selected ones are translated summarily and indicated in Table 1. These policies are divided into policies on nomenclature, curriculum, delivery and student intake and discussed accordingly in the preceding paragraphs.

Table 1: TNE Policies Selected for this Study

Area & Reference No*	Policy
1. Nomenclature DSK 0276	a. 1+2, 2+1 and 3+0 programmes, should include 'in collaboration with' in the name of the programme.
2. Curriculum DSK 0002	a. HEPs are required to use the syllabi of the foreign partner in the 3+0 and 4+0 programme, subject to the inclusion of subjects according to local needs
3. Delivery DSK0220 DSK 0621 Malaysian Qualifications Framework	a. 1+2, 2+1 and 3+0 / 4+0 programmes can only be conducted at a branch of the local HEP upon consent of the foreign partner institution b. HEPs may collaborate with ONLY three foreign partner institutions and can offer up to five programmes with each. c. Minimum graduating credits and notional student learning hours is in accordance to MQF: e.g. Bachelors – UK 3600 notional student learning hours and Malaysia 4800 notional student learning hours
4. Student intake DSK0190	a. Foreign students can only be recruited into accredited programmes
Note: *Policy Reference Number as indicated in MQA policy folder, Dec 2008. ** The policy that is currently used is that of the Ministry of Higher Education which states that foreign students can be recruited into programmes which had obtained LAN/MQA approval.	

Findings and Analysis

This study shows the passage of movement and development in the quality assurance policies and practice from 1997 to 2008. Generally the policy has evolved from highly restrictive approach to a more liberal one. The reason for this, as indicated by one Vice Chancellor (Respondent 3) could be the global changes in higher education and the increasing competition from newer tertiary education exporting countries regionally. Specifically however, the findings show that certain policies were developed and kept in place to encourage and sustain the TNE in Malaysia.

Policies on Curriculum and the MQF

One such example is the 3+0 "mirror image" policy (DSK 0002). This policy requires that the programme conducted locally reflects that offered in the home or source country with allowance for the cultural and socio economic variances. The rationale for this is to ensure that the students doing a full degree locally get exactly the same qualification as their counterparts who are enrolled for the degree in the home country (Respondent 1). This policy provides a warm welcome to TNE providers to establish and conduct programmes in Malaysia without having to make major changes to the existing curricula and search for additional academic support in the home country. The need for the cultural variance is today reflected in the three compulsory subjects of Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), Moral or Islamic Studies and Malaysian Studies to local students (Fernandez-Chung, 2007), offered at the institutions. All respondents had no reservations in implementing the compulsory subject and partner universities do not have difficulties accommodating additional subjects to meet cultural diversity of the country. The difficulty however lies in the content of the course which many feel is outdated and no longer relevant to the students in the current milieu. Thus, whilst the findings support the current policy, it suggests review of the course content of the three compulsory modules. The respondents also call for a collaborative approach in creating the curricula so as the meet the needs of the students.

One way to balance the need to provide the identical programme with the necessary variations for the cultural and socio economic aspects, is by looking at the minimum graduating credits as required by the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) and comparing it to that of the other jurisdiction. The MQF, launched on 1 November 2007 indicates that a bachelor level qualification, for example, requires 4,800 notional student learning hours or 120 credits (MQA, 2007) as opposed to the United Kingdom's 3,600 hours or 36 credits. The additional 1,200 notional student learning hours can be utilised to cater for the cultural and socio economic variance (Respondent 4). However while this augurs well for a programme at the bachelor's level, it cannot be utilised for a UK Master's level qualification as the Malaysian

credit requirement and subsequently the total student learning hour is lower. This will also not apply to systems where there is no equivalent credit transfer framework such as in Australia. Nonetheless, TNE officers interviewed felt that there is no difficulty trying to bridge the credit requirements of the MQF. However, the finding is limited as it is unable to show how the MQF minimum credit requirement affects American programmes since it was not possible to involve American TNE arrangements.

Policy on Nomenclature

The TNE policy that affects the nomenclature of the programme is the policy that requires the use of the term 'in collaboration with' indicated after the title of the programme, e.g. Bachelor of Business Administration (in collaboration with X College) (DSK 0276). For twinning programmes where the students complete their study in the United Kingdom, the scrolls do not indicate the name of the Malaysian institution where they did the first part of their studies (Respondent 6). The difficulty in enforcing the policy rests on the fact that it infringes on the awarding rights of a foreign institution on whom the local policies do not apply (Respondent 5). Thus to overcome this and to ensure that the public is not misled, almost all respondents felt that the transcript (not the scrolls), should contain details that the student had partly or fully completed his/her degree at a particular Malaysian institution. The discussion with the MoHE officials indicates that this is a workable solution and thus the policy could be amended to reflect this finding.

Policies on Programme Delivery

The policies pertaining to the delivery of a twinning programme states the need for the consent of the partner TNE institution before the programme is offered at any centre or branch of the local institution (DK 0220). This policy is well accepted by all interviewed and at MQA, it is a requirement that a letter indicating that the foreign partner institution had consented for the programme to be offered at a new venue. This must be provided as prove at the time the approval to conduct the programme is requested and approval will not be granted if such evidence is not provided.

Another policy on the delivery of collaborative TNE programmes is the limitation to the number of allowable foreign partners and programmes. In the early 1990s, institutions were allowed to partner with as many foreign institutions and for as many programmes as possible. This created the concept of a 'consortium' of partners. Perhaps this is one of the rare examples where the movement in the policy was from a liberal to a more restrictive approach. Today the policy indicates that a local institution may partner with three foreign institutions at any one time and up to the maximum of five programmes with each (DSK0621). This, in effect indicates that the local institution may only conduct a total of 15 foreign TNE programmes at any one time.

Whilst the interviews provided a mixed bag of responses, majority preferred the amendment of this policy. Respondent 4 felt that when the local institution collaborates with many partners, especially from one country there may be conflict of interests and that the institutions will have difficulty meeting the varying requirements of the partner institutions. Respondent 7, whose institutions in involved in a consortium of partnership indicated that often the institution 'bargains' with the partners to reach a level/system/process acceptable by all partner universities when such situation arises. The majority, (Respondents 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8) felt that institutions should be encouraged to enter into collaborative TNE arrangements with one foreign partner but be allowed to offer as many programmes as possible. Respondent 8 felt that allowing the HEP to offer as many programmes as possible with one partner institution will facilitate a mirroring of the foreign institution in Malaysia, something akin to the TNE branch campus concept, without incurring the prohibiting costs. This concept will provide opportunities for the foreign universities to build on the existing strength and support capacity building of the local partner (IAU, 2004).

Respondent 3 had a slightly different view on the above. He suggested that the policy should allow HEPs to partner/collaborate with one foreign partner from one country hence allowing multiple partnership arrangements but from different countries. This, according to the respondent will give greater options to the students. This suggestion has its limitation, as the initial problem of conflict between partners may not be resolved if this suggestion is accepted.

The finding was discussed with the MoHE representative who felt comfortable with the view that institutions are allowed to partner with one foreign partner to offer as many programmes as their resources may allow. This suggestion will, to a large extent, place greater onus on the foreign partner to ensure that the local partner has sufficient infrastructure and resources to facilitate effective teaching and learning and thus achieve quality. The discussion above enables us to draw to the conclusion that policy DSAK 0621 should be reviewed and that the new policy should allow local HEPs to enter into TNE arrangements with one foreign partner and offer programmes according to their collective strengths.

Policy on Student Intake

Another policy selected for this study concerns the recruitment of foreign students into twinning and 3+0 programmes. The policy (DSK0190) states that foreign students may only be recruited into programmes which had obtained accreditation. This policy is not implemented as it contradicts the MoHE's policy which states that foreign students may be recruited into programmes that has obtained the necessary approval (Respondent 2). As recruitment of foreign students is a licensing issue, the MoHE policy overrides the MQA policy. The study is able to show contradiction between policies and recommends that the MQA policy be reviewed to bring it in line with the MoHE's policy.

From the institutions perspective, the MoHE's policy is client-centric as approval process takes 3-6 months whilst accreditation is only given at the end of the first cycle of a programme. The MoHE's policy does not distinguish local from foreign students while adopting policy DSK0190 will effectively limit the recruitment into the first 'trial' cycle of the programme to local students. A majority of the respondents felt that there should be no distinction between local and foreign students. The respondents feel that to safe guard quality and Malaysia's image, the approval process should be made more stringent (Respondent 8).

Others

Apart from the identified policies in Table 1, the interviews also highlighted issues pertaining to the utilisation of generic quality assurance benchmarks and processes. There are no specific policies on whose quality benchmarks apply in twinning and 3 + 0 programmes. The general accepted norm according to Respondent 1 is that the quality benchmarks of both the host country and the home country will apply. However, since the curriculum of twinning and 3+0 programmes are foreign, academic standards and benchmarks that apply should be those of the home country (Respondent 5). The foreign institution has the responsibility to ensure that matters concerning the conduct of the programme meet the QA standards indicated by the respective home QA bodies. MQA needs only to ensure that the indicated processes, such as the need the validation report by the QAA, UK is fulfilled at the time the programmes are sent for provisional accreditation. This shows the willingness of Malaysia to accept the maturity of foreign QA body quality assurance processes and benchmarks.

However as the provision for TNE arrangements goes beyond, what is often labelled as the 'tradition education exporting countries' with a long and sound history of QA, this practice becomes a problem in relation to TNE arrangements from the newer education exporting countries and especially those with a new or weak QA system or none at all (Respondent 8). It also concerns certain form of TNE arrangements where the 'supervision' by the partner institution is at a minimum or none at all, such as in external programmes (Respondent 7). Hence whilst there are many examples of successes in quality policies and processes, there are some areas that require further realignment. For example, in the external TNE arrangements assessment by way of external examinations are not able to fully assess graduate competencies required under the MQF. PHEIs functioning as "tuition support/provider" are generally more concerned about higher passing percentage than meeting the learning outcomes of the programme (Respondent 7). Thus where it is appropriate, this study proposes that mutual acceptance benchmarks and standards will further facilitate successful quality TNE arrangements. However, such approach cannot be generalised as QA agencies must be given the authority to determine the acceptable threshold for quality according to the local needs and requirements.

Conclusion

In conclusion, of the six policies studied, the findings suggest that policy DSK 0190 on the recruitment of foreign students into accredited programme be reviewed and realigned to the MoHE's policy. On the policy pertaining to delivery, the findings suggest that policy DSK0220 on the consent of the foreign partner to conduct programme in a local branch campus be maintained. The policy (DSK0621) which limits HEP to offer a maximum of 15 foreign TNE programmes be reviewed to one foreign partner with as many programmes according to the capacity of the institutions. The MQF minimum graduating credits requirements poses no major problems and thus should be maintained.

In relation to the policy pertaining to curriculum, DSK 0002, on the mirror image curriculum with the inclusion of subjects according to local needs, the findings suggests that the policy be maintained, but there is strong support for the review of the existing compulsory modules curricula. Finally, policy DSK0276 on the use of the term 'in collaboration with' to be included in the name of the programme, the findings suggest that the policy should be reviewed. It is proposed that the indication of collaboration be inserted into the transcript rather than the scroll.

Malaysia's success in TNE can largely be attributed to the policies which are generally facilitative. It shows that Malaysian QA policy implementers are able to assimilate international QA practices and benchmarks without adversely influencing the quality of the programmes. However, the study also brings to the forefront some areas of concern, mainly the lack of collaboration between local policy makers, implementers and policy guardian, i.e. the MQA. Respondents from the HEPs affirm this by saying that the lack of collaboration between these very crucial agencies hinders the smooth application of standards, policies and systems.

Furthermore, the study also indicates the need for stakeholder consultation before policies affecting TNE are put in place. Quality assurance agencies, like the MQA can no longer afford to develop, implement and review policies in isolation especially when *developing acceptable approaches to TNE will be an ambitious task* (Mc Burnie & Ziguras, 2001, p. 101). There must be clear and transparent guidelines to how these policies are developed. TNE partners, QA agencies, TNE offices and respective ministries must work together to achieve quality TNE. Lastly, whilst the system in the past has been agile to accommodate global economic, political and educational changes, there are some suggestions that these changes introduced were not evidence based, and hence there is an urgent need to build capacity especially within MQA, as guardians of quality, to cater for the expanding needs and thirst, locally, regionally and globally, for TNE education.

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