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CS 9: Transnational Education

Transnational diploma courses leading to progression onto top-up and Masters Degrees.

Author: Dave Burnapp

Introduction.

This case study illustrates several of the key issues arising from one type of transnational educational (TNE) programme, in particular the growth of diploma programmes which are devised and validated by UK-based organisations yet delivered overseas, i.e. the students follow UK programmes taught in English, whilst staying in their own country. This relates to issues discussed in 'Chapter Two: Growth of Transnational Education' and 'Chapter Three: Quality Assurance in International Collaborative Courses', and to the case study 'CS 7: Collaborative development of an online module'.

Key learning up front

- **CS 9.1.** It is essential to accept that all the stakeholders involved in TNE will need to recognise differences in approaches to teaching and learning which go beyond just using a different language.
- **CS 9.2.** It is necessary to facilitate continuing professional development (CPD) of teaching staff to familiarise them with different approaches to teaching and learning.
- **CS 9.3.** It is essential to include suitable preparation of students for different approaches to teaching and learning, perhaps in a foundation year preceding TNE programmes.
- **CS 9.4.** It is essential that the teachers are introduced to the principles underlying the surface behaviours contained in the teaching approaches the TNE course requires: for example: that use of *discussions* is underpinned by a concept of the social construction of knowledge.
- **CS 9.5.** In order to supply suitable staff development it is essential to have teaching contracts which are not very short term.
- **CS 9.6.** It is essential to encourage the students to use a wider range of sources instead of over-reliance on the supplied

programme materials. This autonomy should be developed step-by-step throughout the students' experience of the TNE programme.

- **CS 9.7.** It is necessary for the centres to recognise that issues relating to language proficiency, both for entry and for progression, need to be dealt with rather than deferred.
- **CS 9.8.** It is recommended that institutions receiving students from TNE courses onto top-up degrees recognise that the constraints experienced by the TNE institutions will have necessitated compromises, so should supply the same language support and the same study skills support to the TNE students as they do to other international students.

Background: HND programmes in China.

Within the QAA 'Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications'¹ the diploma programmes discussed here are at level 5, and within the Scottish system they are at SCQF level 8². Later in this case study a particular feature of the descriptors of this level will be examined in more detail; that as well as knowledge and application of subject/discipline theories and techniques this level also requires that students demonstrate generic skills relating, for example, to critical thinking, communication, and autonomy.

These TNE programmes can be seen to contribute directly to the development of national human capital by adding trained staff to the workforce³, but often an extra intention is to allow some of the students to progress via articulation agreements to universities outside their home country, for example to the UK. This case study is based on publicly available reports on the websites of several of the concerned organizations, and also on primary research conducted in the UK and China with students at different stages of their studies. Discussions were also held with university administrators and staff, and with the senior management of one validation agency, the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA). It is believed that the issues identified are more generally applicable for other diploma level TNE courses.

It is hoped that a wider understanding of the features of these TNE programmes, and the constraints under which the validating bodies and the delivering institutions operate, will enable the universities in the UK and beyond to understand and hence better cater for the needs of these

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08/FHEQ08.pdf>

² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/2001/scqf.pdf>

³ The students who follow the SQA validated HND programmes described in this case study also receive a Chinese national vocational qualification.

students when they progress to their top-up courses. Similarly it is believed that a wider understanding of the issues which these students face on arrival in the UK, that is when they progress to top-up degrees, will better enable the validating bodies and their international partners to prepare them for this transition.

This case study relates to several of the themes which are emerging concerning the internationalisation of higher education including: growth of transnational education (TNE); a growing understanding of the influence of cultural factors on educational methods and expectations; issues relating to improving the quality of the experience of international students; issues relating to staff development; and issues relating to institutional capacity building.

Background to the issues which this case study addresses.

Elsewhere in this project report, in 'Chapter Two: Growth of Transnational Education' and in 'Chapter Three: Quality Assurance in International Collaborative Courses', there is a deeper exploration of the importance of this form of internationalising higher education. This case study raises the questions of whether and how it can be possible to directly replicate in one culture a system of education which is drawn from a different culture, and which incorporates a different set of beliefs concerning what knowledge is and how learning should be demonstrated. Chapter Two emphasises the importance of assuring an ethical base for such programmes, and Chapter Three outlines the need for carefully constructed quality assurance procedures. It is worth repeating the quotation from the OECD⁴ (2005) guidelines reported in Chapter Two:

cross-border provision of higher education offers students/learners new opportunities, such as increased access to higher education, and improvement and innovations in higher education systems and contributes to the building of international co-operation, which is essential to academic knowledge as well as, more generally, to national social and economic wealth (p5).

The growth of this form of provision is firmly based on an intention to increase access to higher education, as well as a desire to equip some graduates with the international skills and competences (and indeed alternative ways of thinking) which result from experiencing other systems of education.

⁴ OECD (2005) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border education*.
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/27/51/35779480.pdf>

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It is possible to identify motivations for involvement in such programmes at several levels: national; institutional; and individual. At a national level, for one country this can be one part of a package of responses to a growing need in the population for increased access to higher education, whilst for the other country it can be a way of increasing inward flows of international students who may subsequently be encouraged to remain in sectors where talent is needed. At an institutional level, for both partners, this can be one way of increasing reputation and student numbers as well as associated income streams, and also is a way of giving academic staff an opportunity to become familiar with different models of education. At an individual level this is an alternative route to higher education, to improved English language skills, and to the benefits of a wider and more international educational experience.

It is also worth noting that there are both push and pull factors associated with the articulation agreements for top-up and Masters degrees which often follow on from the diploma programmes, as more and more universities around the globe compete to attract a flow of international students and the advantages they bring, including (but not restricted to) fee income and alternative perspectives and experiences. There are therefore a growing number of universities from the UK and beyond which are competing fiercely to recruit the students who graduate from these diploma courses⁵.

There can be, however, difficulties associated with the integration of these students when they progress abroad and begin their top-up courses. Universities already engaged with the recruitment of international students have long been aware that steps need to be taken to optimise their success; in particular with measures concerning English language and the acquisition of the specific study methods necessary to be able to demonstrate intended learning outcomes of their courses. It should be recalled that these outcomes include not only the knowledge, theories, and techniques of their subject, but also the generic skills of critical thinking and autonomous study. It is tempting to assume that students progressing from TNE diplomas, having already studied in an English language medium and having already used UK style approaches to teaching and learning, would not experience the same degree of difficulty. This though, in some cases at least, has been shown to be an unreliable assumption; hence this case study will demonstrate why such difficulties

⁵ For a list of current articulations concerning the SQA HNDs see:
<http://www.sqahnd.org.cn/En/e3.asp>

can continue to occur for some students who have experienced TNE and will offer suggestions of steps which can be taken by all parties involved.

Management of TNE diploma programmes.

The following extract supplies a narrative of the development of the SQA programme in China, taken from a submission made to the European and External Relations Committee of the Scottish Parliament in November 2008⁶, and gives an indication of the intentions of the different parties involved. The submission identifies the partner which the SQA works with: the Chinese Service Centre for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE), a 'legally registered corporate body affiliated to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, which offers a full range of services for scholarly exchanges', then gives the following overview of the development of the scheme:

Higher National Diplomas (HNDs)

8. SQA signed a Memorandum of Understanding with CSCSE in November 2003, and the first HND units were delivered in SQA approved centres in China at the start of academic session 2004-2005.

9. The SQA HND programme was underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the governments of Scotland and China, signed in January 2005. This promoted a 5-year programme for Chinese students studying the HND in the English language, the first 3 years of which are studied at universities in China. This government to government MOU was refreshed, and subsequently signed on 7 April 2008.

10. The first cohort of SQA HND candidates graduated from SQA-approved universities in China in June 2006 [...]

11. Year 1 of the 5-year programme, is a Foundation Year and this has a focus on English Language and Culture in addition to study skills. The traditional 2-year taught, full-time HND then follows and the first 3 years of the programme are delivered in Chinese universities.

⁶ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/Europe/documents/Writtenevidence-2DecSQAWEB.pdf>

12. Students then have several options. They may either progress to a degree programme in a university overseas or in China, or they may choose to enter the job market. Of those who successfully graduated in 2006 and 2007 and elected to further their studies overseas, SQA HND candidates went to 14 different countries. [...] The Fresh Talent Initiative to help attract students to study and work in Scotland was widely advertised and promoted to candidates embarking on HNDs in China.

At the time of that submission the frameworks offered in China included: Supply Chain Management; Administration and IT; Travel & Tourism; Hospitality Management; Financial Services; Electronic Engineering; Computing; and Business. There are currently 17 awards which have been prepared for use in China, but three of these have yet to be taken up by centres there. The number of centres offering the programmes in China, and the number of students, initially showed a controlled growth after the launch, a conscious decision to avoid over-rapid expansion made by both the SQA and the CSCSE in order to control quality and guard the reputation of the programme. In November 2008 there were 6,500 students on the HND part of the programme and around 3,000 on the introductory foundation year. The Chinese website of the SQA reports that currently (accessed 10th June 2010) that: 'there are more than ten thousand candidates studying CSCSE-SQA HND courses in the twenty approved centers of SQA and CSCSE'⁷.

It should be recalled that currently SQA involvement is restricted to the two years of the HND proper, with no control over entry levels and content of the foundation year. The quality assurance methods have evolved to use as far as is possible the same procedures as in Scotland. The relevant website of the SQA⁸ outlines the principle activities:

We take quality assurance very seriously and approach this in a number of ways:

- we develop all of our qualifications so that they conform to established design rules to ensure that SQA qualifications are up-to-date, comprehensive and focused on the needs of those who use them;

⁷ <http://www.sqahnd.org.cn/En/index.asp>

⁸ <http://www.sqa.org.uk/mini/27404.1099.1239.html>

- we involve professionals from industry, education and training and trade unions in the development of SQA qualifications and we review them constantly;
- we only allow centres to deliver SQA qualifications if they meet the stringent approval criteria that we set;
- we produce support materials, learning guides, assessment exemplars and marking guidelines to ensure that our centres are aware of the standards of competence that a candidate needs to acquire in order to obtain an SQA qualification;
- we have a team of 1500 staff who are all subject experts in SQA's qualification areas. These experts are available to visit centres and carry out staff and curriculum development related to the delivery and assessment of SQA qualifications;
- we operate a rigorous verification policy to check that staff in centres are interpreting standards correctly when they make assessment judgements on candidates' work.

The quality assurance procedure begins with the due diligence process of approval of centres wishing to deliver the programmes. This consists of two stages, the first being an evaluation conducted by Beijing Yinhong, an organisation in China acting on behalf of the CSCSE⁹, to assess the quality of the institution, for example to check whether it is a 211 university, i.e. a university of high standing¹⁰. Following this the SQA carries out its own two-stage approval process which mirrors the processes used in Scotland. This involves checking on suitability and availability of resources, expertise, capacity etc, firstly to decide if the institution is fit to be an SQA centre, and then to assess its suitability to deliver the specific programme/qualification. When programmes are up and running the quality assurance procedures involve internal verifiers in the centre carrying out checks on assessment decisions made (having been trained by SQA in the procedures to follow), with external verifiers who look at candidate evidence and samples of work. The external verifiers are appointed by SQA, and now are mostly Chinese subject specialists who are trained as verifiers, based on the external examiner model used in Scotland (e.g. an academic from Beijing can be the external for a centre in Shanghai). In some cases specialists need to fly out from Scotland, but this is not the rule. The training of verifiers is ongoing, and is seen by all of the parties to be a central part of the collaboration, indeed the quality assurance processes operated by the SQA for their programmes in China

⁹ <http://www.sqahnd.org.cn/En/e1.asp>

¹⁰ <http://www.edu.cn/20010101/21852.shtml>

is an area of activity which has been commended by the Chinese Ministry of Education¹¹.

Materials Development.

The description of support for centres quoted earlier included supplying 'support materials, learning guides, assessment exemplars and marking guidelines' for each of the frameworks, and some of these materials were developed by the Colleges Open Learning Exchange Group (COLEG)¹². Initially a range of staff development activities were organised to familiarise staff in China with these materials, which included bringing in experts from Scottish higher education institutions. One element of staff development is the creation of an 'International Bilingual Teaching Qualification (IBTQ)' with elements taught in both China and on visits to Scotland, but this certainly has not included all staff teaching on the programmes.

An HND framework in Scotland typically has a number of core units and a range of optional units, but in China each framework consists of 15 units for each of the two years of the programme, giving the students no options. There has also been a demand from some centres to have 'the book' for each unit or framework, in contrast with a desire to base units around more autonomous activities (for both students and teachers) which can achieve a unit's intended learning outcomes. This can be thought of as an ongoing tension concerning pedagogic methods between, on the one hand, the SQA and its partners (CSCSE and Beijing Yinhong) which all would like to see more autonomous approaches, and on the other hand the centres which are seeking to reduce the risks associated with discussing various viewpoints on topics where knowledge is disputed and still in evolution. These two issues, however; lack of choice amongst units, and lock-step teaching around fixed study guides, may contribute to student problems when on top-up degrees where student autonomy is expected as the norm.

Training of teachers.

The teachers on these programmes are of course very varied, including some overseas staff as well as a majority of Chinese nationals who have often studied in English speaking universities, usually at Masters level¹³.

¹¹ <http://www.sqa.org.uk/mini/27402.1099.1242.html>

¹² <http://www.scotlandscollages.ac.uk/curriculum/learning-resources/learning-resources.html>

¹³ For typical qualifications demanded see the recruitment website at <http://www.sqahnd.org.cn/En/e7.asp>

That said, a typical profile of the Chinese teachers can include these features: they have the required theoretical base of the specialism they are teaching, for example being well-qualified in Marketing or in Logistics; they are proficient in their own use of English; they are comparatively young (meaning they may perhaps have limited practical experience of working in that specialism outside of academia, this is in comparison with the profile of teachers on similar diploma courses in Scotland). Often they are on short-term contracts, perhaps as short as a single term, which makes the issue of continuing professional development problematic.

If the aim of these programmes is just the teaching of the knowledge, skills, and competences of a domain (for example knowledge of concepts and techniques in the domain of Marketing) in the English language¹⁴, then the background of these teachers would seem to be an adequate base. However earlier in this case study it was explained that these awards are at SCQF level 8. The descriptors for the SCQF include five categories:

- knowledge and understanding;
- practice: applied knowledge and understanding;
- generic cognitive skills;
- communication, ICT and numeracy skills;
- autonomy, accountability and working with others.

At level 8 the intended outcomes for these descriptors include demonstration of what are seen in UK higher education to be higher order outcomes, such as critical thinking, dealing with complex information, and exercising autonomy. For the teachers to have experienced UK higher education as students, even at Masters level, does not equate to automatically possessing knowledge of the underlying principles of UK style approaches to teaching and learning. Without sufficient grounding in *why* certain approaches are used (as well as *how* to use the approaches) there is a danger that lower order transmission of subject-specific knowledge will be given precedence over development of a higher order critical approach to that knowledge.

As an example of this danger, there is a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, communicating to students a list of requirements concerning what a portfolio related to a certain unit should include, and on the other hand instilling in the students a recognition of the role of

¹⁴ Note, however, that the descriptions of the HND frameworks are at times that they are taught in English, and at times that they are taught bilingually. Pragmatically one should expect them to be taught bilingually, but this raises a question concerning how much Chinese language support should be given. This is taken up later in the case study.

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keeping a portfolio on a regular basis throughout a course as an aid to reflective learning. The former approach – where the portfolios could perhaps be put together near the end of the course as a summative record of didactically transmitted items – effectively short circuits the intent of using portfolios as a formative aid to developing reflective approaches. Teachers in the UK are aware, of course, that some students do hastily compile portfolios at the end of a course, but the teachers themselves should endeavour to demonstrate a difference between an objective focus on gathering the items to include (the products) and a subjective focus reflecting on your own changes throughout the progress of a course (the process). The differences which can arise by not appreciating the distinction between focussing on *contents* rather than focussing on *intentions* of using portfolios can be illustrated in the following table:

Comparison of approaches to use of portfolios	
Description of content	Understanding of purpose
Method: transmission of information	Method: autonomous discovery
Intention: products of learning	Intention: process of learning
Contribution: summative outcomes	Contribution: formative development
Focus: objective recall	Focus: subjective reflection

The often reported features of very close teacher-student relationships in China¹⁵ may result in what can be thought of as over-scaffolding, resulting in short-term support to teach items necessary to pass this specific unit (which incidentally is how the quality of teaching may be assessed). This, however, may be at the cost of reducing the development of strategies for autonomous discovery which will be expected later when the students enter progression courses. The question raised earlier: how can a system of education drawn from one culture be replicated in another culture, implies overtly accepting that there are different beliefs concerning the

¹⁵ See Jin, L. & Cortazzi, M. (1998). The culture a learner brings: a bridge or a barrier? In M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds) *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspectives*, Cambridge: CUP.

nature of knowledge and hence how learning should be demonstrated, and hence identifying the staff development needs which arise from these differences.

Foundation year and English language proficiency.

It should be repeated that the foundation year is not yet standardised, and is beyond the control of the SQA. Interviews with students from a range of locations found that centres typically use this year to teach English, often using IELTS preparation materials. The SQA does not control English language entry levels for the foundation year; and after the foundation year a level of 4.5 is recommended to enter year one of the HND, but entry is controlled by the centres. Similarly there is no English level set for progression from year one to year two of the HND proper. It should be noted, however, that a certain level of language ability is *necessary* 'to convey complex information to a range of audiences and for a range of purposes', to use a SCQF descriptor of intended outcomes at level 8. However, having a high language level is of itself not *sufficient* to 'undertake critical analysis, evaluation and/or synthesis of ideas, concepts, information and issues which are within the common understandings of the subject/discipline' to use another level 8 descriptor.

Here, as with the discussion above concerning teacher competences, the students need an introduction to the essential beliefs in the UK system concerning the nature of knowledge and how students need to demonstrate knowledge (critical analysis, evaluation, and synthesis). The design of the foundation year therefore needs to reconcile a dilemma: excessive concentration on English proficiency, such as IELTS preparation, will not in itself prepare students for the changed academic requirements they will need in UK-style education; whilst not enough development of English proficiency will leave them ill-equipped to study and convey complex information. It may be possible, particularly in situations of over-scaffolding as described earlier, for students to develop short-term survival strategies of reproductive learning or translation, but this could be storing up problems for them on their progression top-up courses.

Conclusions and recommendations.

The majority of students researched to compile this case study reported pride in their achievements on their HND courses; a liking for the methods they have used; and confidence in their future. Many, however, reported that the methods they found when they entered the top-up courses were

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not what they had experienced on their TNE course, and that despite three years of preparation their levels of English were still causing problems. This language weakness should be interpreted as not just concerning formal knowledge of English language (its grammar and vocabulary) but also concerning the uses of English language expected in the UK style of higher education; the whole set of skills relating to researching, summarising, and following conventions related to referencing. It is possible that short-term survival strategies developed to pass the TNE course could have resulted in deferring rather than confronting the requirement to develop this skill set. In terms of the descriptors of this level referred to throughout this case study, it seems that transmission of subject-specific knowledge has sometimes been prioritised over the development of generic skills of critical thinking, communication, and autonomy. It is possible that over-scaffolding by using Chinese to help understanding has not encouraged the students to develop their own use of English, and that reliance on supplied course materials has reduced the students' ability to research independently.

For the validating organisations and the TNE centres it is recommended that they consider the following suggestions to make the student experience more of an authentic preparation.

- Firstly to recognise openly that all the stakeholders involved will need to make changes in approaches to teaching and learning which go beyond just using a different language: this may involve persuading the centres to reconsider their role in the continuing professional development (CPD) of teaching staff and to reconsider the nature of the foundation year of the programmes.
- Concerning staff CPD it is essential that the teachers are introduced to the principles underlying the surface behaviours contained in the teaching approaches the HND course requires. There is a need for overt training in these principles, for example: that use of *discussions* is underpinned by a concept of the social construction of knowledge; that *critical evaluation* is based on an assumption of there being various viewpoints to a topic, and that each is valid; that learning can involve subjective *reflection* as well as objective recall. To engage in a CPD programme with such philosophical depth cannot be accomplished with one-term teaching contracts.
- The centres, and hence the teachers, need to allow and encourage the students to use a wider range of sources instead of over-reliance on the supplied programme materials. If possible, the introduction of optional units would similarly allow students to make

choices, as often they are expected to make such decisions on top-up courses. This autonomy should be developed step-by-step throughout the students' experience of the HND programme.

- Similarly, the lack of structure of the foundation year could be a missed opportunity to link the development of language to the set of skills relating to UK-style study methods described earlier, and the underlying principles of these approaches. It is hoped that the validating organisations and the centres can agree to the creation of a common content for the foundation year, and to link language development to study approaches.
- Following from this, it is necessary for the centres to recognise that issues relating to language proficiency need to be dealt with rather than deferred. Hence a progression of language levels could be set, for example to finish the foundation year with the equivalent of IELTS 4.5, to transfer from year one to year two to require IELTS 5 and so on. This would discourage the development of avoidance strategies which might work on the HND course itself, but will cause students difficulties on top-up courses.

For the institutions receiving the students on top-up programmes it is recommended that they should recognise that the constraints experienced by the TNE institutions will have necessitated compromises. These result in less development of students' language skills, autonomy, and critical thinking, in comparison with students with comparable qualifications. They should consider the following suggestions to make the student transition easier.

- Concerning English language, to supply the same language support to the TNE students as they do to other international students.
- Concerning familiarity with UK-style study methods, not to assume that these will have been fully developed by their TNE experience, and therefore to supply the same study skills support to the TNE students as they do to other international students.

It should not be assumed that the UK-style of education described in this case study is being presented as the best form of education, but that if the desires of the stakeholders, (including the Ministry of Education in China, the validating organisations, and the participating students), is to have a UK-style education then this should be taken as an integrated whole. The distinguishing features of this include the generic skills which have at least equal importance as the subject-specific knowledge.