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An examination of the key educational issues to emerge from a professional development programme for offshore lecturers in Singapore.

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Abstract: Universities are increasingly recognising the importance of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning across their study programmes. With this essential focus in view, the Division of Business at an Australian university has implemented their strategic plan in relation to obtaining quality student feedback and establishing appropriate staff development and teaching and learning support. As a result, in 2000 the Unit Effectiveness Project was instituted to obtain regular feedback from undergraduate students regarding their perceptions of the unit and the learning experience. There have been protocols established to respond to the feedback, and support provided to teaching staff to assist with the ongoing refinement of teaching and units. While teaching and learning support is available to onshore teachers, there has been a need to provide similar support to our offshore lecturers within partner institutions. To this end, a professional development programme has been instituted throughout 2002. This article explores the initial stage of the evaluation of the professional development programme and outlines future directions proposed by participants.

Keywords: professional development, offshore teaching, evaluation

Introduction

Universities increasingly need to recognise the importance of ensuring the quality of teaching and learning across their study programmes. In demonstration of commitment to fine teaching and learning practices a Business School (a division comprising six schools) of a Western Australian University has implemented the Divisional Strategic Plan in relation to obtaining quality student feedback and supporting staff professional development. This undertaking was timely considering government demands for accountability in the form of quality assurance as part of funding packages, and the promotional advantages with regard to the informal rankings of performance (examples displayed in the *Good Universities Guide* and *Asia, Inc.*) and the demands of employers. In response to these trends in increasing accountability the Division of Business in 2000/2 established a systematic quality assurance mechanism called the Unit Effectiveness Project (UEP) to obtain feedback from students regarding their perceptions of the learning experiences in their units. Data from the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ) are returned to Unit Controllers in the form of a report that encompasses statistical and open-ended data. Ongoing reflection on teaching and refinement of the units is
promoted through the recommended process whereby Unit Controllers meet with their teaching colleagues (tutors) and the Divisional Teaching and Learning Coordinator to explore the report on that unit. In these team meetings, the report is examined, positive aspects of the units identified for consolidation, and potential aspects for improvement or modification explored. A strategic plan to refine the unit is then developed and implemented the following semester. The planned refinements are then re-examined in the following UEP evaluation cycle.

While this student feedback and unit/teaching refinement process has fewer logistical impediments within the onshore campus, initial audits of the offshore procedures and discussions with offshore staff have revealed an urgent need to develop a more systematic professional development support mechanism for the University offshore lecturers. It was proposed by the Teaching and Learning Coordinator in semester 2, 2001 to initiate a professional development workshop series that would coincide with the auditing process of the UEP in offshore partner institutions. This professional development would consist of interactive workshops that specifically targeted the development and enhancement of a repertoire of learning and teaching strategies, ongoing reflection on strategies to support student learning and also facilitated networking and the sharing of examples of sound teaching practices. In addition to the workshops, personalised assistance in exploring matter related to teaching and learning would be made available to individual lecturers, wherein they could meet with the Coordinator of Teaching and Learning to discuss and explore the implications of his/her UEP report and develop a plan for refining the learning experiences in specific units the following trimester. This proposed professional development process was designed to mirror, as closely as possible, the service provided to the onshore campus teaching staff. A survey comprising thirty items was administered to the Business School offshore lecturers early in 2002. The items were related to the four components of the Business School Offshore Development Programme which included identifying common presentation faults, planning and organisation, establishing optimal learning environments and teacher characteristics.

The original survey did not allow for a full investigation into such issues as student interaction and cultural beliefs about teaching and learning. It was therefore deemed necessary by the researchers to conduct on-site semi-structured interviews with the original sample in order to further investigate the emergent key issues involved in offshore teaching practices. This paper focuses on the issues to emerge from the interview data and further explores the increasing pressure for the tertiary sector to produce, monitor and evaluate quality offshore teaching now and in the future.

**Theoretical framework**

Many researchers, teachers and educational leaders have become increasingly concerned about evaluating the effectiveness of professional staff development programmes (Guskey, 1994; Guskey & Peterson, 1996; Guskey & Sparks, 1991; Hirsh & Ponder, 1991; Joyce & Showers, 1995). Professional development is no longer solely focused on providing educators with increased skills, rather, the focus is on ensuring that professional development has the effect of improving student learning. This is often difficult to capture and as a result, researchers involved with professional development are indicating that evaluation processes should be built into a professional development programme as a method to track the effectiveness of the initiative and the effect on organisational culture (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Moffett, 2000; Schwahn & Spady, 1998).
The Theoretical Framework for the current evaluation of the Business School offshore Professional Development Programme is based upon the model formulated by Guskey and Sparks (1991). The model outlines the factors that contribute to changes in teachers’ instructional practices and behaviours and involves how to evaluate the effect on student performance as a result of professional development. The three main components of the model are ‘Quality of the Staff Development Programme’, ‘Organisational Climate and Culture’ and ‘Content of the Staff Development Programme’ (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1: Factors in a model for staff development (Guskey & Sparks, 1991)

As the arrows indicate ‘Quality of the Programme’ is the central factor. Quality is a multidimensional component which encompasses all aspects of training. ‘Programme Content’ refers to the research basis for the content of the professional development, or proof that it works and is viable for use in the cultural setting. Organisational climate and culture affect both initial and continued use of an innovation. According to Guskey and Sparks (1991) ‘contexts that nurture, support and trust, encourage shared decision-making and responsibility, and provide ongoing assistance and opportunities for problem-solving appear to be the optimal situation for successful efforts’ (Guskey & Sparks, 1991, p.73). Stage One of this current evaluation involves an investigation of the ‘Content’ of the Offshore Staff Development Programme as per Guskey and Sparks (1991).

The Professional Development Programme – Workshop One
Preparing an effective professional development programme acknowledging the principles of adult learning should involve selecting content that is tailored to the specific needs of the participants to ensure relevancy and suitability (Lieb, accessed May, 2002). Unfortunately, communicating with the part-time lecturers via partner administration networks was not efficient and, in some instances, quite difficult for a range of reasons. After many unsuccessful attempts to elicit feedback from individuals regarding teaching and learning needs, it was decided to formulate a somewhat generic workshop that would suit the majority of teachers and thereby entice participation. It was hoped that once teachers had come to the first workshop and a rapport was established with the presenter, direct communication and ongoing feedback would be easier.
As most teachers conduct some form of presentation in classes the topic of presentation was identified as one that may hold universal appeal. Included in this broad topic was the value of effective presentations, a problem-solving activity concerning why some presentations do not work; brainstorming the components of effective presentations; examining planning and organization skills; the need to incorporate activity, interactivity and reflection in establishing optimal learning environments; the importance of good introductions and conclusions and a collegial sharing of sessions of ‘presentation tips that work’ – which was designed to promote the pooling of ideas of teaching and learning strategies that have worked particularly within the Asian educational context. Lecturers were also encouraged to circulate their contact details in order to facilitate collegial contact with each other on matters related to teaching.

The participants of the professional development workshops were content specialists (eg., bankers, human resource managers, market analysts etc) who have no formal teaching qualifications or training. They were frequently teaching the University units part-time while engaged in other work usually within the Business sector.

**Research methods**

Interpretive research focuses on a specific social setting or phenomena. As noted by Erickson (1986), and by others such as Patton (1990) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994), within the interpretive approach there are many methods—however they all share the same philosophical assumption, which is, that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). Stage two of the data collection for the current research involved the administration of a semi-structured interview schedule to a group of fifteen offshore lecturers in the Curtin University Business School programme based in Singapore (N=15). The instrument was jointly developed by the authors in a research partnership which represented the Faculty of Education and the Business School. The instrument included both open and closed questions and comprised a total of ten items. The structure of the interview allowed for the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

**The instrument**

The interview schedule utilised in this study was developed to further investigate issues which were identified by the sample as a result of the initial survey. The survey did not allow respondents to fully explain their attitudes towards a number of key factors such as improved student interaction and performance, use of cooperative learning techniques, cultural beliefs about teaching and learning, improved knowledge of teaching theory and systemic concerns regarding, for example, a perceived need for formal accreditation as a result of involvement in the Professional Development Programme. The interview schedule comprised ten items with the last item representing a ‘catch-all’ where participants were asked to discuss any issues concerning the Professional Development Programme that they believed had not previously been attended to. The interviews were conducted in Singapore with the voluntary sample (N=15) in May 2002 and the Business School Professional Development Programme was conducted concurrently with the data collection. Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes. Participants were asked to respond to nine statements related to key issues as identified in stage one of the research using a five-point Likert scale (e.g., Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Unsure, Agree, Strongly Agree) (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Participants were further asked to expand on their responses to key elements of the Professional Development Programme and these data have been evaluated through the application of a content analysis. The number of responses to the closed questions was not large enough (N=15) to allow for the
data to be analysed statistically as the results would be unreliable. These data have been represented in terms of frequency of response. Frequency counts of the various responses to the items have been included as indicators of the participants’ viewpoint of the major issues concerning the Professional Development Programme.

**Results**

The results of the open items in the interview were analysed qualitatively. A content analysis was performed on the data and comments were examined, divided into categories and tabulated. The reliability of these categories was confirmed by two academic colleagues within the Faculty of Education, who had not been directly involved in the Professional Development Programme or stage one of the evaluation. An inter-rater reliability coefficient of eighty five percent was calculated using the formula from Huck, Cormier and Bounds (1974).

$$\text{Percentage of agreement} = \frac{\text{Total number of agreements} \times 100}{\text{Total number} + \text{total number of agreements of disagreements}}$$

The results of the closed items were tabulated in terms of frequency and provide background information to the overall attitudes of the sample to each component of the interview schedule.

*Item 1: My participation in the professional development has helped me to increase student interaction in my classes*

![Figure 1: Increased interaction between students as a result of professional development](image)

The majority of comments to item one were positive. Respondents indicated that as a result of the workshop they were more confident and likely to use interactive processes in their classes. Methods such as breaking students into groups to discuss tutorial content were being trialled by the sample. Respondents also suggested that they were attempting to ask more direct questions of students during tutorials and were developing skills of deep questioning having previously failed to ask for student participation or at best not explored a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer any further. Negative open-ended responses indicated that offshore lecturers believed the cultural difference between western orientated students and those from a Singaporean background made it difficult to promote any degree of student interaction in classes. These lecturers suggested that the passive nature of the learner in the Asian and Chinese context impacted upon their ability to encourage students in classes to either work together in small
groups or pairs. These students were comfortable with a model of teacher- directed learning which had been instilled in them throughout their primary and secondary educational experiences and were disinclined to share ideas with fellow students even at the request of the lecturer. Similarly it was perceived that students felt insecure when asked to interact directly with each other in tutorials. Negative open-ended responses to item one also indicated that in many instances lecturers believed the quantitative nature of their subject area prevented a full exploration of interactive activities and that they were under substantial pressure to cover all aspects of the course in a short period of time. These comments suggested that lecturers believed they would jeopardise their positions and content completion by allocating time to interactive group work.

Item 2: My own interaction with my students has increased as a result of recent professional development

Figure 2: Increase of lecturer interaction with students as a result of professional development

Positive open-ended responses to item two indicated that lecturers were attempting to promote a more practical orientation to the delivery of the content in order to encourage students to engage in discussion. These lecturers were also attempting to build a sense of ‘safety’ in their classes in terms of students feeling more secure in actively engaging in interaction. Students were encouraged to attempt answers to direct questions without the fear of ridicule or embarrassment that may follow an incorrect response. Positive responses also indicated that as a result of the professional development offered by the Business School, lecturers were more inclined to create a more accessible and relaxed atmosphere by moving beyond a mere formal introduction of themselves to classes and were beginning to include more personal details such as their own family backgrounds, hobbies and interests. They had not attempted to do this prior to the professional development workshops. These respondents suggested they had deliberately ensured that within the first and second teaching session they had engaged in some form of one-to-one discussion with every student in their group during the teaching period. Positive responses also indicated that as a result of the workshops they were more consciously aware of the need for active participation by students and the links between participation and learning.

Negative comments indicated that the nature of the short-term employment experienced by a number of the offshore lecturers and the pressure by the local training market to produce high-level student examination results precluded them from pursuing greater interaction with their students. In a number of instances lecturers were not provided with a permanent office onsite and were often under pressure to hurry to additional classes in other institutions which involved considerable travelling time. These lecturers were clearly not in a position to make themselves available for external discussions which would enhance their interaction with students during regular class time.
Item 3: I find that elements of the professional development programme do not match my current beliefs and practices as far as my teaching is concerned.

The majority of responses to item three were either positive or very positive. Comments indicated that lecturers believed the components of teaching and learning practices that were covered in the professional development programme matched their own beliefs and practices in teaching. Lecturers expressed a sense of responsibility in terms of facilitating learning in their students. Positive comments indicated that these respondents enjoyed a more learner-centred approach to teaching even though in most instances market pressures associated with successful examination results had influenced their respective employers to prefer more teacher directed methods. While wishing to remain employed, these respondents had found small, incremental ways of creating a certain congruence between their own needs as lecturers to deliver more student-centred experiences and the regulatory frameworks of their various employer organisations. Positive comments also indicated a belief that students’ ability to enjoy learning and absorb new information was dependent upon high levels of student confidence in lecturing staff in terms of accessibility and content knowledge.

Negative comments indicated that there appeared to be an assumption that the teaching models selected for use and presented in the professional development programme were examples of current and best practice in teaching and learning pedagogy. Negative comments also suggested that these approaches encouraged greater levels of student interaction and it was assumed that this was always necessarily a positive factor in the teaching/learning process.

Item 4: The time and effort I am putting into my professional development through attending workshops is paying off in terms of improved student performance.

The majority of responses to item four indicated that offshore lecturers were unsure as to whether their own pursuit of professional development was resulting in improved student performance. Comments suggested that these lecturers found it difficult to measure any improvement due to the fact that communication between themselves and the students was fairly limited. Students would rarely engage in dialogue regarding their new learning and their general attitude towards their own development. These respondents cited lack of time as one of the main factors that had prevented them from pursuing conversations with students about their progress through units of study. They also indicated that they viewed their main task as presenting the unit content and not to create and analyse links between their own professional development and student performance. Comments suggested that the one-off nature of much of their lecturing resulted in the sample not having an ongoing opportunity to assess student
development over time. These lecturers may facilitate one unit of study with a particular group of students throughout a trimester without the ability to access the same group at future teaching opportunities. Six respondents, however, answered either positively or very positively to item four. These lecturers clearly believed that the effort they were making in order to develop professionally was having an impact upon student performance particularly in terms of students’ ability to communicate and interact verbally during class time. Comments suggested that these lecturers were making deliberate choices to experiment with and implement methods of group interaction for example, that had obviously improved student understanding of content and their ability to analyse and synthesise course content.

Figure 4: Improved student performance

*Item 5: I am using more collaborative or cooperative learning techniques in my classes.*

Figure 5: Increase in use of cooperative learning techniques

Interestingly, while nine respondents answered positively to this item, five members of the sample were unsure as to whether or not they had increased their use of collaborative approaches in their classes. Comments suggested that these lecturers were confused about the actual terms used in the item and the practical approaches that had been modelled for them in the professional development programme. A number of lecturers needed to ask for clarification regarding the exact meaning of the terms ‘cooperative’ and ‘collaborative’. In some cases, a simple explanation prompted their recall of the various techniques. A number of responses indicated that in some instances collaborative learning was impossible to achieve given the diverse age groups in each class and the language barriers experienced between students of Chinese and Malaysian backgrounds. These lecturers were unsure as to whether collaborative learning strategies such as role-play and group projects would be useful in such settings. They indicated that in their opinion, arbitrarily forcing students to join together in order to work towards a result or outcome would eventually prove to be counterproductive and they tended to avoid doing so.
**Item 6:** My overall knowledge of teaching theory is improving as a result of the professional development.

Figure 6: Improvement in overall knowledge of teaching theory

The responses regarding item six are interesting given that seven members of the sample were unsure as to whether their knowledge of teaching theory had improved as a result of the professional development. One respondent indicated that they felt their knowledge of educational theory had not improved following the workshops. The open-ended comments revealed that the sample believed that improvement would only become obvious over time and that it was difficult for them to ascertain at the time whether or not they had begun to actively synthesise and use new theoretical insights in their teaching. A number of comments suggested that although the additional access to theory was personally interesting and useful, the transfer of information into teaching sessions was difficult given the restraints placed upon the lecturers by employers and the cultural expectations of students.

Positive comments reflected the fact that seven members of the sample had in fact begun to actively utilise components of teaching theory in their classes. They were experimenting with various sequencing strategies such as advance organisers, more coherent approaches to ordering main body information, direct questioning and summaries.

**Item 7:** It is important for me to have more teacher/student contact apart from class time.

Figure 7: Importance of student-teacher contact apart from class time

Responses to item seven were fairly mixed with seven members of the sample indicating a positive to very positive response and six indicating that it was not important for them to increase their interaction with students apart from regular, scheduled classes. Two members of the sample were unsure about the importance of non-class contact with students. Those who indicated a positive response suggested that although increased contact would be the ideal, the system under which they were employed did not lend itself to such arrangements.
As stated earlier, a number of the sample often found themselves in the situation of needing to travel quickly to other institutions in order to fulfil teaching duties. The members of the sample who answered positively indicated that they had tried to implement improved communication practices with their students such as allowing students to telephone and email them after hours regarding work issues.

Item 8: The new teaching practices are presented clearly in the professional development workshops

Figure 8: Clarity of new teaching practices presented in professional development workshops

The responses to item eight were clearly positive. The sample agreed that the new teaching practices had been presented clearly. Open-ended comments suggested that the workshops had been designed to allow for modelling of new strategies and follow-up practice in pairs and groups. This approach had assisted the sample’s long-term re-call of approaches to be adopted in the future.

Item 9: There is a need for formal accreditation through Curtin University for participants in teaching and learning professional development workshops.

Figure 9: Perceived need for formal accreditation for professional development

Item nine resulted in a reasonably mixed response. Five respondents indicated that they were unsure whether formal accreditation was necessary as they had engaged in the workshops voluntarily and viewed their participation as simply fulfilling their professional responsibility. Those members of the sample who disagreed stated that they were happy with the current system and that levels of enthusiasm were displayed through attendance. They also viewed the workshops as an opportunity to network and perhaps enhance further employment opportunities. As these lecturers were largely involved in technical/quantitative areas such as finance and accounting they believed their employers were interested only in their formal
qualifications and not in short-course accreditation. The six members of the sample who answered positively suggested that student confidence in their ability as lecturers was enhanced by achieving further formal accreditation in teaching/training. These lecturers also believed that there should be links established between further accreditation and pay scales. In some instances they indicated that the remuneration offered by the offshore institutions was too low to attract high quality lecturing staff. A number of comments suggested that the Singaporean educational culture is certificate-driven and although reputation in the market place was of paramount importance, extra accreditation from an established and esteemed tertiary institution would be of benefit.

**Overall reactions to the professional development**

The sample indicated that they believed there was a need for ongoing staff development for offshore lecturers. The respondents believed that the facilitator was responsive to the needs of the group and that sharing ideas with colleagues had been useful. It appeared that participants were in favour of the interactive style used by the facilitator during the workshops. The respondents indicated that being able to discuss problems related to teaching and learning had been of benefit in terms of improving their teaching and they also indicated that they would like to attend further sessions related to teaching and learning.

Analysis of the final open-ended item revealed that the sample believed the experience had been of assistance in clarifying a number of issues related to teaching and learning such as the importance of interacting with students and colleagues and sharing ideas associated with good practice. The majority of comments suggested that as a result of the workshop participants had developed a better understanding of mutual needs and expectations and that this new understanding would enhance their teaching. It is clear that the opportunity to interact with fellow professionals was of great benefit to the participants. Comments indicated that there was a perceived need for ongoing exchange of articles on teaching practice and one respondent suggested that written material containing examples of good teaching be e-mailed to offshore lecturers on a regular basis along with case studies for the purpose of increasing learning and professional development. One participant suggested that the workshop would be more interesting with an increased use of role-plays and the exchange of success stories. Again, the comment regarding the perceived need for video examples of good teaching was made with regard to increasing the effectiveness of the programme.

**Conclusions**

The professional development programme was clearly perceived by participants to be successful in assisting their understanding of the importance of sequencing information for the successful transfer of new knowledge to occur (Arends, 2001). The majority of participants also agreed that as a result of their professional development, they were more inclined to keep their teaching resources up-to-date and that their understanding of the need to provide learners with clear statements of outcomes prior to the delivery of new information was enhanced. The majority of the sample indicated that the workshops had been successful in assisting them to increase their understanding of the importance of pitching their learning materials and experiences at appropriate levels for learners and they also believed that involvement in the workshops had increased their understanding of the importance of variability in teaching and learning. The results indicated that more attention needs to be given in the future to the skills necessary to increase student interaction in tutorials. Although a number of the sample indicated that they were more confident and therefore likely to use more interactive processes in their classes, other responses indicated that the cultural
differences between an essentially ‘western model’ of teaching and learning, and the nature of the learners in the Asian and Chinese context, impacted upon the overall success of implementing such approaches. This may indeed be a key area for development given the cultural context of the site involved in the workshops. The research indicates that while offshore lecturers were making attempts to interact more with students outside of the formal teaching programme, they were finding it difficult due to conditions of employment, time and physical resources. Technology was of use in this instance and increased use of the telephone and email in order to communicate was evident.

The sample indicated that they have started to make conscious improvements to characteristics that will eventually enhance the learning that occurs in their classrooms, such as improved and appropriate body language. Awareness of student response to the participants’ teaching styles may be an area in need of further attention. It could be that ongoing development of interaction skills as mentioned earlier, will assist in improving communication between the participants and their students and this in turn, will enhance the standards and achievements of the offshore programme in general. Although the sample were largely unsure as to whether their participation in professional development was resulting in improved student performance, a number of comments suggested that this may occur over time and that continued exposure to the professional development programme was desirable. The results clearly suggest that the Offshore Professional Development Programme is generally valued by participants and that it should continue with minor amendments to structure and content such as an increased use of case study approaches and more opportunity to witness and discuss best practice in teaching and learning.

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