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Leading Transnational Education Partners through distributed leadership

Maggie Xiaowen Gao
University of Greenwich

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Author: Dr Xiaowen Gao

Greenwich Business School

University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS

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Abstract

Many studies have identified the importance of distributed leadership as a potential contributor to positive change and school improvement. Marking moderation is an important quality assurance process to check marking consistency ensuring the validity and reliability of allocated marks (Mahmud and Sanderson, 2011; Sadler, 2013). A key value of marking moderation is how the mark is agreed upon through discussion and collaboration (Sadler, 2013), as a result, this can be a valuable source of both informal and formal professional development.

Nevertheless, it is not clear whether Transnational partners appreciate the value of moderation practices as it is often observed as a box-ticking exercise where little time has been invested in developing a shared understanding of assessments and marking standards among module teams. This has a far-reaching impact on students as sound marking and moderation are fundamental to student experience and success. Our project therefore takes an action research approach (Altrichter and Gstettner, 1993) following the distributed leadership theory and aiming to enhance collaborative marking by engaging TNE colleagues via pre-marking meetings to enhance the quality of marking and to develop competencies in partners' academic staff.

Introduction

In recent years, transnational programs are increasingly being offered by UK higher-education institutions across national borders. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2022), UK universities delivered transnational education to more than 510,800 students– a 12.7% increase in 2021/22 over the previous year. It clearly sets out in the QAA's Quality Code for Higher Education that 'the degree-awarding body has ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, regardless of where these opportunities are delivered and who provides them' (QAA, 2013, B10, p. 6). To ensure the quality of TNE provision, the home institutions put in place consistent processes to ensure the programmes are of 'equivalence' between onshore and offshore provision. One of the processes is marking moderation, a key practice underpinning quality assurance equivalence.

Research suggests that moderation is an important quality assurance activity to check marking consistency (Mahmud and Sanderson, 2011) and is used to ensure the validity and reliability of allocated marks (Sadler, 2013). A key aspect of moderation is how the mark or grade is agreed upon through discussion and collaboration (Sadler, 2013), as a result, this can be a valuable source of both informal and formal professional development. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether TNE partners appreciate the value of moderation practice as it is often observed as a box-ticking exercise where

little time has been invested in developing a shared understanding of assessment requirements and marking standards among module teams (Bloxham et al., 2013).

Despite the fast growth of TNE education offered by UK universities, there is limited research on moderation practices that are conducted between the home and host institutions. UK universities normally exercise quality control via a post-marking moderation to ensure the quality of the programme meets the requirements and standards of QAA. However, post-marking moderation based on pre-designed marking schemes provides no opportunities to develop a shared understanding of the assessments and marking criteria. This leads to the moderation process simply a command-and-control exercises between home academics and host academics. Given the complexity of TNE partnership due to the differences in higher education system, in institutional arrangement, and in culture, a shift from reliance on command-and-control leadership model to a distributed leadership should be encouraged.

This research follows an action-research approach and aims firstly to explore module leaders' perceptions of current marking moderation practice at home and host institutions. Secondly, following the theory of distributed leadership in the context of TNE programmes to analyse the current practice and recommend a strategy for promoting collaborative marking to facilitate community learning and capacity building in the partnership institutions.

Background

Transnational education (TNE) is defined as education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based (Universities UK). There are different modes of transnational education including franchised delivery, joint and dual degrees, validation, branch campus and self-study distance education. Franchised programmes are the most common collaboration in transnational education. For franchised programmes, the awarding institution franchises delivery of programmes that is designed for its own students at home to a host institution overseas. The host institution is responsible for delivery of a programme while the awarding institution remains responsibility for the standards of awards and quality assurance of the programme.

This research is based on a Business School in London, which has more 20 years' experience in providing transnational education. The international partners of the Business School are mainly located in Southeast Asia including Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Vietnam. Similar to the pattern of TNE provision across all the UK universities, 50% of the students involved in the TNE education are from Asia (UK Universities). As franchised programmes are the most common type of TNE partnership, we will concentrate on two franchised programmes Accounting and Finance programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The insight learnt would benefit franchised programmes at other UK HEIs and other types of TNE provision.

Given the nature of franchised programmes, the two TNE programmes delivered overseas at international partners use the same teaching materials and assessments that are designed by a module leader of home institution which are used by students both onshore and offshore. Offshore students are normally formally registered University students of both home and host institutions who are provided access to Moodle and intranet of the two institutions. Academic modules are delivered by local module leaders who are also responsible for marking. Overall student performance, grades and samples for each module are then moderated by the respective module leader at the home institution. There are also external examiners appointed to oversee the TNE programmes.

Literature review

Challenges faced by TNE programmes at module level

Operating TNE programmes successfully is a challenging task. TNE partnership is highly contextualized, a “one-size” approach to manage definitely does not fit all TNE partnership (Helm, 2015). For academics who teach on a TNE programme, they need to work with colleagues from other institutions with different cultures and locations. It is inevitable that not only do these academics need to adjust the differences in two higher education systems in order to meet the requirements set by both sides, they also need to adjust the differences in different cultures in order to work together. Furthermore, academics can only communicate with their partners and deal with all issues via emails as it is impossible to meet the team face-to-face. In addition, there is little time available for academics to make regular contact given the increased workload. According to a UCU report based on the workload survey 2021, 87% of university staff say their workload has increased over the past 3 years, with more than two-thirds (68%) saying it has increased significantly (UCU report, 2022).

Marking moderation

Moderation is an important and commonly adopted quality assurance activity to ensure marking consistency (Mahmud & Sanderson, 2011), yet the process can be complex and fraught (Beutel et al., 2017). Achieving marking consistency is challenging due to the knowledge of individual markers, their previous experiences and individual biases (Bloxham, 2009; Orr & Bloxham, 2013). The difficulty is compounded by the number of markers and their understanding of the required assessment standards (Watty et al., 2014; Grainger et al., 2019b). Crimmins et al. (2016) and Lekkas and Winning (2017) claim that moderation can support quality assurance, enhance markers’ understanding of assessment standards, and help to facilitate engagement and feelings of belonging and inclusion.

In addition, “power disparity” was reported between module leader and sessional academics at module level (Mason et al., 2022). Furthermore, McBurnie (2008, p. 193) also reported “due to geographical distance from the provider institution, TNE programmes are inherently more prone than their domestic counterparts to disconnection and negligence”.

A growing body of research suggests team teaching becomes a necessity rather than a choice in the fast-growing higher education sector due to the increased student numbers at universities. However, despite of the size of TNE provision, little attention has been paid to the “parallel model’ in TNE context.

Distributed leadership

There is increasing evidence showing a positive relationship between distributed leadership, organisational improvement and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Leithwood & Mascal, 2008). Distributed leadership is the sharing and distributing of leadership practices (Malloy, 2012). It is not something ‘done’ by an individual ‘to’ others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organization ...[it] is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 3).

In this type of leadership, Individual expertise is the focus of distributed leadership rather than position (Anderson, et. al., 2008; Bennet et. al., 2003; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Malloy, 2012). According to Halverson (2007), distributed leadership emphasizes working for the same goals with continuous communication and interaction rather than individual effort and it is possible for the staff

to collectively work and learn together. Copeland (2003) claimed distributed leadership develops the capacity of a teacher with the help of another teacher.

Research questions:

What are the perceptions of marking moderation of academics on TNE programme?

What are their understanding of shared knowledge and value in higher education in a TNE partnership?

Methodology

This research takes a qualitative approach. Data was collected by conducting interviews with module leaders from the home institution whose module has an international provision and module leaders from international partners who teach franchised courses on the same programme. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Interview questions were constructed as open-ended questions in order to explore the participants' experiences and to understand their decisions in relation to how they participate in marking moderation. All of the participants are module leaders. The length of their experience in higher education are varied from one to twenty-five years.

The interview questions are around two aspects. One is the participants' perceptions of marking moderation process; the other is the participants' understanding of shared knowledge and value of higher education. We asked 6 questions under each aspect with the key questions to help with a better understanding.

Preliminary results

From our data we found that host academics view marking moderation as a control mechanism imposed by the home institution. Some host academics accept the feedback made by home module leader automatically. On the contrary, some home academics express frustration when their feedback is challenged by host academics due to a lack of understanding of marking criteria or knowledge of regulatory process of home regulation. In addition, host module leaders regard module contents and assessments as comprehensive, but direct communication with home module leaders is lacking. Informed by these findings, we have developed a strategy to engage host academics following a distributed leadership model to enhance a shared understanding and knowledge and to build capacity in a learning community.

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