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Identity and social practice in higher education: student experiences of postgraduate courses delivered ‘offshore’ in Singapore and Hong Kong by an Australian university

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Abstract

This paper highlights the complexities surrounding the social practices involved in being an international higher degree student, and the ways in which these practices contribute to the formation of student identity. It reports research in progress aimed at understanding how higher degree students experience studying for a degree delivered ‘offshore’ by an Australian university. In particular, it presents findings of two interpretive case studies, one of a masters degree course delivered in Singapore and another of a doctoral dissertation programme delivered in Hong Kong. The line of inquiry concerns questions about the perspectives of the students: how they understand the dynamics of their particular educational context and their sense of themselves as students in relation to the communities to which they belong.

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1. Introduction

The accelerated global trend in international education towards the delivery of courses offshore provides a new and dynamic context for teaching

and learning. Australian universities are increasing their offshore operations (Chen et al., 2001) and the strong growth in offshore student enrolments seems likely to continue (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001). The international student enrolled with an Australian university is increasingly likely to be studying, not at a campus in Australia, but in Hong Kong, Singapore or Malaysia (Davis et al., 2000).

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Accordingly, there is a growing research interest in teachers' and learners' experiences of the offshore phenomenon. On the issue of student experience, students themselves are the ultimate 'insiders and experts' (Jackson, 1992). Despite this, what is conspicuously missing from the research literature is the voice of the student. This paper portrays offshore postgraduate study through interpretive case studies of students' perspectives on their educational experiences. The paper commences with an outline of the background and context of the research project. Summary findings from two cases studies conducted in Hong Kong and Singapore are presented. The discussion and conclusion compares the cases, distinguishes parallels and develops propositions.

2. The research project

The research reported here is conceptualised within the interpretive paradigm as it seeks to understand the experiences of students from their perspectives; the 'frameworks' through which they make sense of the world. Central to the interpretive paradigm is the importance on the perspectives of people as individuals. From an interpretivist position, the social world is subjective. Each individual constructs their own social reality. In order to understand social reality, it is therefore necessary to study how individuals interpret the world. 'Social life can be adequately understood only from the point of view of the actors themselves' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1993, p. 28). To this end, case studies were made of two groups of postgraduate students studying for a degree delivered offshore by an Australian university in partnership with a local provider.

One group of participants consisted of 26 students taking a coursework masters degree in Singapore. The other group comprised 21 students enrolled in a professional doctorate by coursework and thesis in Hong Kong. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually with six students from each group, qualitative surveys of all students and document analysis. Prior to the surveys, a document review was conducted of programme infor-

mation that outlined objectives, teaching schedule, outcomes, assessment guidelines and faculty policies for the courses from which the participants were selected. Informed by the document review, guiding survey and interview questions were developed to determine the following aspects of participants' perspectives: their aims and intentions with regard to choosing the programme; the strategies and practices used to achieve those aims; the significance that they attach to the situation; and the reasons they give for the aims, strategies and significance. For the individual semi-structured interviews, the guiding questions were not specific questions to be answered. Rather they were focus issues pertinent to the research aims. Questions were framed and modified following the individual responses of participants.

The conceptual framework of the research is informed by social practice theory, which views learning as a situated activity in which issues of cognition, context and social interaction cannot be considered in isolation from each other. As an aspect of social practice, learning involves the whole person; 'it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Our line of inquiry therefore involved questions about the 'ontology' of offshore higher degree students; how they understand the particularities of their particular educational context and their sense of themselves as students in relation to the social communities to which they belong.

Identity is multi-dimensional. Wenger (1998) distinguishes five dimensions of identity, summarised by Sachs (2003, p. 125) as follows:

- (1) *identity as negotiated experiences* where we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as the way we and others reify ourselves;
- (2) *identity as community membership* where we define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar;
- (3) *identity as a learning trajectory* where we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going;

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