Preparing Academics for Transnational Education – Do We Practise What We Preach?

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ABSTRACT

Best practise international HRM in the area of expatriate management usually incorporates the provision of cross-cultural training and support for international employees at each stage of their overseas assignment. While such support is particularly critical prior to departure, it remains important across the duration of overseas work and should also extend to post-assignment debriefings and the capturing and sharing of key learnings. While such best practise models are commonly taught in undergraduate and postgraduate HRM units, and many academics regularly travel offshore to teach intensively within transnational education programs, anecdotal evidence and empirical work undertaken to date indicates that cross-cultural training and support remains, at best, informal and spasmodic. The current research study was thus designed to explore the nature of training for transnational academics leaving Australia, especially in the primary offshore education markets of China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. In these countries, the cultural distance from Australia is significant, often highly so. On this basis, the study's aim was to verify the existence of the perceived gap between what is taught and what is experienced in expatriate support for transnational academics and, to the extent that a gap exists, reflect upon ways in which it might be bridged. Accordingly, two universities were selected from the Australian university sector and academics and offshore program managers interviewed to obtain their perceptions of these issues. While the value of formal cross-cultural training programs was acknowledged, most participants viewed informal support and development mechanisms as of potentially greater value given the increasingly intense demands on academics to simultaneously succeed, both locally and internationally, as teachers, researchers, and community contributors. In addition, the study's participants raised several concerns about the nature of their role as lecturers and institutional ambassadors operating within very different cultural contexts. These responses highlight several areas for further improvement among the management and support activities given to such transnational education activities.

Keywords: transnational education, academic perceptions, expatriate management, international HRM, international management, offshore education

INTRODUCTION

Working in another country brings significant challenges, both for the employee who relocates and for the organisation who employs them. As Livadas (2008) has noted, 'beneath every foreign assignment lies a complex network of calculations, expectations, and effort'. For everyone to benefit, several elements of expatriate HRM are critical (Micciche, 2009). First, expatriates should be selected for their emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity and, if appropriate, language skills. Second, pre-travel preparation is critical. For longer assignments, this may take the form of an early visit to the destination, ideally with mentoring while on-site by colleagues who have already become culturally familiar in the new location. Whatever the duration of the stay, cross-cultural training can arguably assist in ensuring that offshore employees avoid the kinds of culture-related mistakes that may occur in the absence of a real familiarity with local norms, values, and communication styles.

A recent study of the expatriate experience in German, UK, Japanese, and US companies sheds light on these practices (Tungli & Peiperl, 2009). In relation to selection, the most important selection criteria for foreign assignments were, in order, technical and professional skills; the expatriate's willingness to accept the assignment; experience in the company; personality factors; leadership skills; and the ability to work in teams. Of later relevance to this paper, previous international experience ranked only 10th of the 15 criteria considered. In terms of predeparture training, Japanese companies provided more training than the other nations. While language training was commonly provided in each nation, the likelihood of

departing employees receiving country-specific cross-cultural training was much lower in Germany and the UK and somewhat lower for US companies. The most common reason cited for a failure to provide cross-cultural training was a shortage of time.

The importance of cross-cultural training has long been cited in the international HRM literature (Tung, 1988; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Lee, 2007). In addition to those general dimensions already cited, best practice in cross-cultural training and development incorporates customisation to the employee's individual needs; the embedding of cross-cultural training within a broader array of support services; a match between training rigour and the cultural toughness of the destination country; a skill-development based approach to cross-cultural training; the use of scenarios and multiple media in training methodologies; and post-training evaluation to determine the efficacy of training interventions (Littrell & Salas, 2005).

While most research has historically focused on international assignments of a year or more, increasing attention is being paid to shorter-term assignments. Among these are assignments of a few months in duration, commuter-style assignments in which staff move constantly between their home base and one or more international destinations, and the growing use of "flexpatriates" whose international sojourns flex around the evolving needs of their organisations (Mayherhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kollinger, 2004). The management of such assignments may in some ways be even more complex than that associated with longer-term postings whose management and organisation has, in any event, been characterised as haphazard, disorganised, incoherent, and chaotic (Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2001). To better inform improvements to practice, it is argued that an enhanced

understanding of the flexpatriate experience is thus required, building on the knowledge of what organisations actually do rather than on the theories of how they should do it (McKenna & Richardson, 2007). This paper responds to this call.

Getting this right is particularly important given the fact that the perceived benefits of short-term assignments, primarily focused on the organisational virtues of cost effectiveness, simplicity, and flexibility, may bring corresponding personal costs to those undertaking them, including negative side-effects such as alcoholism, detrimental impacts on personal and family relationships, and the creation of poor working relationships with colleagues in both the home and offshore offices (Tahvanainen, Welch, & Worm, 2005). Indeed, the presence of such personal costs will inevitably flow back into negative impacts for the organisation as individual productivity declines and downwards trajectories on morale take their course.

Such issues are also of increasing significance to those universities around the world who engage in transnational education (TNE), the delivery of higher education programs in other countries. Australian universities currently enrol more than 100,000 students in transnational courses, also known as offshore programs, primarily in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and China (Universities Australia, 2009; IDP, 2009). Many of these programs rely on Australian academic staff for delivery, usually on a "fly in/fly out" basis. The academics are normally "on location" for around two weeks.

While research has been scarce on the perceptions and experiences of these flexpatriate academics, one study found that although little was offered to these staff in the form of

predeparture training, most had learnt informally via interactions with colleagues. Indeed, a key conclusion from this study was that most academics desired additional opportunities for such interaction, both before and after their international teaching activities (Dunn & Wallace, 2006). This finding is consistent with research in the corporate context which found that while notionally viewed as important, few organisations provide their flexpatriates with training in cross-cultural awareness and communication (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007). Like academics, many corporate expatriates are left with the responsibility to develop themselves.

Yet there remains a contention that cross-cultural training, particularly for academics travelling offshore, should be formalised, even if this means the "formalisation of informalisation", or the deliberate strategy of ensuring that informal activities for development and awareness actually occur on at least a quasi-scheduled basis. For Gribble and Ziguras (2003), the formalisation of informalisation could do much to assist both individual academics and their institutions, since demonstrates a commitment to a key element of quality assurance in transnational education. In addition, more explicit attention is required, they argue, to the provision of formal predeparture information about the general and country-specific issues to be faced by the flexpatriate. Such information should incorporate considerations of the cultural, the social, and the pedagogical.

Why is this so important? Because in the end, as Ringwald (2006) concludes in an analysis of the subtleties and nuances inherent in academic partnerships with the Chinese, it may be an individual's ability to successfully negotiate and leverage the informal networks inherent in their offshore role that determines their own success and satisfaction and, moreover, either

contributes to or detracts from their institution's reputation, levels of service, and overall program quality.

In summary, while there may be formal policies (see, for instance, AVCC, 2005) exhorting Australian universities to uphold transnational program quality via a commitment to ongoing staff development and preparation, particularly through the provision of cross-cultural training programs, both anecdotal evidence and the studies undertaken to date indicate that the gap between rhetoric and reality may be significant.

METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken in several stages. In the first stage, universities that were active in transnational education programs were identified via discussions with the international section of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (now known as Universities Australia). As a deliberate, purposive sampling strategy, two highly-contrasting institutions were selected. Once initial institutional contact was made, participants were selected primarily for their experience with transnational programs, either as program managers, offshore lecturers, or administrators. In ensuring a multi-perspective approach, participants ranged from relatively junior transnational program administrators to faculty and divisional deans. Across the two institutions, 30 semi-structured, convergent interviews were conducted, evenly split between Regional U (15 interviews) and Research U (15 interviews). Of these, there was a relatively even split between senior institutional managers in academic

or quasi-academic roles (deans, heads of departments and schools), teaching academics, and offshore programs administrative and support staff.

In relation to their transnational education involvements, Regional U administered programs in China, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka, while Research U's programs were based only in China.

RESULTS

The study's results will be presented as follows. Following an overview of the institutional context, the perceptions of the study's participants will be considered in terms of (a) the cross-cultural challenges and impediments to effective transnational teaching and relationship-building; and (b) their views about the support provided by their home university through formal and informal training and development. A summary of the key themes arising in the study is presented at the conclusion of this section as Table 1.

Case 1 – Regional U

Regional U is a relatively young, multi-campus university. Most of its present-day campuses were originally Colleges of Advanced Education. In 1989, these were merged into the one entity, after which the institution was given full university status. Despite the conglomeration, each of these campuses is well known within the rural areas in which it is

located. Indeed, the University has managed to retain a distinctly rural feel, reinforced by its commitment to the development of the rural areas of which their campuses are a part.

Regional U has grown to become *the* rural university for its state and stands among the largest and best-known regional institutions in Australia. Since becoming a university, Regional U has grown to the point where it employs around 600 full-time equivalent academic staff and almost 1,000 general staff. Student enrolments are over 33,000 across some 450 courses. Interestingly, only around one quarter of these students study on-campus in Australia. The majority of students studied via one of the university's domestic or international partnerships, including the offshore programs under examination in this case study, or in one of the university's distance education programs. As a former College of Advanced Education, the university's roots remain very much in teaching and learning.

Regional U is differentiated by a culture of entrepreneurialism, with their willingness to adopt innovative approaches to transnational education resulting in the development of a specialist unit, denoted here as the Offshore Programs Unit (OPU), whose primary purpose is to manage the Faculty of Business's transnational education programs.

With the Unit's central focus on the development and administration of offshore programs, Regional U's offshore teaching academics regularly travelled alone into challenging, high-context Asian cultures (Hall, 1976). The employment of dedicated subject coordinators served as the cornerstone of a strategy that aimed to meet their Asian partner's desire for a 'long-term orientation' in their business dealings (Bond & Hofstede, 1989).

From the outset, Regional U was well suited to the TNE arena. First, the university had an entrepreneurial background that encouraged staff to explore opportunities beyond the university's normal stream of activities. Second, its experience with offering distance education meant that they had a ready-made platform for running offshore programs. Indeed, many of the respondents at Regional U believed that the University's involvement in offshore programs was a logical extension of their well-established external studies program:

> … the University has got quite a good system – our distance education system, so the offshore programs are very much related to this. It has used very similar management structures and processes to manage all these things.

Like other universities, Regional U's early years in offshore programs involved a great deal of exploration and learning. Given a broad mix of successful and less-successful initiatives, the early part of the current decade brought a narrowing in the range of ventures to create a portfolio that was not only more strategically aligned to the core focus of the university but, as important, was more likely to be profitable. In order to achieve this objective, the Faculty of Business decided to create a discrete entity that would be solely responsible for all of its offshore program activities, the OPU.

The Offshore Programs Unit, created in 2001, manages all of the Faculty's transnational programs and is by far the smallest School within the Faculty of Business. The School maintains twelve staff including its Head, two professors, four OP Specialists (offshore program managers with background as academics), and five administrative staff. Together, they managed programs in several locations with a combined cohort of more than 2,000 students. Key programs included undergraduate business degrees in China and Malaysia, all

administered in conjunction with partner universities or professional organisations at each location.

Regional U demonstrates a strong awareness of the need for high program quality in offshore programs. In particular, the university's senior management were aware of and committed to the need to maintain equivalence between its local and transnational programs. The university has developed project administration manuals designed to ensure that each offshore partner's administrative matters were dealt with in a consistent manner, and was creating a range of transnational education relationship management processes designed to assist internal communication, debt management, risk management and partner performance assessment.

Cross-Cultural Challenges and Obstacles

Language and communication issues were the most significant cross-cultural impediments identified by Regional U's academics and program managers. The university had sought to overcome some of these issues by making a decision to only teach offshore using English as the language of instruction. By teaching exclusively in English, Regional U avoided the difficulties and expenses associated with using translators. Nevertheless, the decision to do so had by no means alleviated all language and communication-related issues. As observed by Hall (1976), there is a high level of non-verbal communication in Asian cultures. Thus, even though they were interacting with staff and students from the partner institution in English, Regional's staff needed to be just as conscious of non-verbal signals, such as eye and body movements, in order to avoid miscommunications and misunderstandings. Similarly, one

academic, with a great deal of offshore experience, had noticed that even if the students and staff at the partner institutions could speak and understand English very well, this did not necessarily translate into both parties thinking in the same way. He felt that this was a significant cross-cultural challenge that had the potential to inhibit an academic's ability to effectively represent the university offshore:

> You really have to remind yourself sometimes that, just because people speak English and have a conversation, does not mean that they actually think like you. … These guys think completely different to me. It is very difficult to just go offshore and represent a program the way you would do it here.

These subtle yet significant differences in thinking, encountered by most respondents, are reflected in Hofstede's (1980, 1991) cultural dimensions. In particular, the program managers in the OPU were struck by their offshore counterpart's adoption of a long-term perspective in their approach. Similarly, the high regard paid to older academics with doctoral qualifications was considered as part of the offshore party's culturally embedded need to observe status-ordered relationships.

The more-experienced academic respondents were also aware of the inherent difficulties of operating in Asia's high-context cultures. As a result of spending many years in this region, these participants were aware, for example, that body posture is noticed more readily in these cultures. One academic came to understand that the placing of hands on hips was considered mildly confrontational in Asia and thus best avoided. These more-experienced respondents realised that if an academic was not familiar with the high-context aspect of Asian cultures

then their ability to communicate effectively in this environment might be compromised, leading to potentially damaging mistakes for the university:

> … just some of the very, very small things, but they can build up such as how to present oneself in a foreign country in terms of the protocols … They are all small things but the small things often are noticed. … if we sent a few people from here they would just blunderbuss into a situation and would wreck the relationship just by doing seemingly small things that can be quite rude things from a foreign perspective.

Many respondents also mentioned differences in learning styles as a significant cross-cultural challenge in the offshore teaching environment. They noted that this was an important inhibitor to their ability to teach offshore. Nonetheless, they were aware that if they were willing to adapt their teaching style then they would, by default, become better communicators and, in turn, better ambassadors for the university.

An issue also grounded in cross-cultural difference was the pressure that many of these academics were placed under to pass students in the offshore programs. The academics at Regional U applied a merit-based approach to the grading. By contrast, those in the partner institution sought to pass students that had clearly failed in order to save 'face'. This very important Asian cultural concept, captured within Bond and Hofstede's (1989) fifth cultural dimension, Confucian Dynamism, is rooted in the collective desire to maintain a sense of stability within the society. The OPU's program managers maintained that it was virtually impossible to adhere to this cultural norm as it involved passing students that would not have passed if they had studied the same course in Australia.

Needless to say, this issue was of considerable concern to Regional U's senior management. For the university, it brought to the fore a fundamental tension between wanting to maintain the relationship with the partner institution and the imperative to preserve Regional U's academic integrity. Senior academics were adamant that their dual and overriding objective was to preserve a high level of program quality and to comply with the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's (2005) guidelines on this issue. As such, they asserted that they had always maintained equivalence between their offshore and onshore activities. Whilst their efforts were, at times, the source of considerable tension between Regional U and some offshore partners, they claimed that by holding their ground on this issue they had earned the respect of the partner:

> … we have never backed off in terms of what we expect the students to achieve in terms of standards, so it may well be that they look at the program as a legitimate offering, whereas some of the other Western programs are quite clearly just there to get the money and to have a good time.

The OPU was aware that in parts of Asia there tends to be greater respect for older academics. As such, none of the OPU program managers at the time of undertaking data collection were less than 45 years of age. In addition, the extent of a potential program manager's prior dealings with people from other cultures was evaluated prior to their hiring. As a result, these academic managers were more comfortable learning about cross-cultural issues whilst they were on the job:

> … we try and pick up what those nuances are and how we should act … I do not think anyone taught us about that. We just had to pick that up.

The process of tackling cross-cultural challenges was made easier by the presence of a healthy camaraderie within the OPU. The unit appeared to enjoy the sort of team-based environment that Mohr-Jackson (1991) has recommended in which staff intuitively respect and build upon the work group's internal relations. There was an ethos within the OPU in which the program managers were very much encouraged to share their anecdotes and ideas with each other. As one noted, 'We talk about the cross-cultural challenges after meetings. We travel together occasionally and we get talking'. Many of these academic managers felt that by establishing this environment, the OPU had managed to cultivate the unit's collective cross-cultural knowledge. Nonetheless, most of these academics realised that ultimately it was the contact that they had with the partners and students whilst offshore that really served to embed their understanding of cross-cultural issues:

> … in terms of understanding the cross-cultural challenges and getting around them, a lot of it is on the job, and it is about you just being open and listening.

The OPU had adopted as policy that that new staff be accompanied by an experienced offshore programs manager on their first overseas trip. Whilst this was a more expensive option, the OPU's management recognised that it would pay dividends in the future:

> … where there are new people, we make sure that at least two staff might go off to an area initially. … It costs a little bit more, but in the long term, there is a much better benefit.

Lastly, respondents claimed that Regional U's willingness to commit to its offshore arrangements in Asia meant that their partners were more willing to accept various cross-

cultural misunderstandings. They felt that this was especially the case in China, where the university's partners were aware of and appreciated Regional's ten-year commitment to offshore programs in that country. In making such a commitment, the university's actions were consistent with that country's predominant 'relationship orientation' (Varner & Beamer, 2005). The pay-off for Regional U was that on those occasions when their academics made cross-cultural faux pas, which might for example involve an unintentional loss of face for the partner, then these were viewed within the context of this commitment. Accordingly, these often unintended mistakes were less damaging than they might otherwise have been.

In summary, Regional U was well placed to deal with the cross-cultural challenges that it faced in the offshore environment. Many years of experience had taught them not to underestimate the depth and complexity of East–West cultural differences. From this experience, they had developed staff selection processes that enabled them to assemble teams that were well-equipped to deal with cross-cultural challenges. Importantly, Regional U demonstrated sensitivity to their partners' culturally embedded 'relationship orientation'. As a demonstration of their willingness to converge around their Asian partner's culturally-derived preference for longer-term arrangements, Regional U had made a significant, long-term commitment to both transnational education generally and its partners more specifically (Bond & Hofstede, 1989).

Training Programs for Transnational Teaching Academics

Regional U provided training across a wide range of areas for its academics and other employees through a combination of workshops and specific training programs offered by the Professional Development Unit. For academics, the vast majority of their training had been

designed to enhance their teaching effectiveness in local markets. Training and development activities designed to improve the offshore teaching experience were thus negligible:

> Certainly for teaching, there is a lot of emphasis upon teaching effectiveness at Regional U … So there is support available. Is it specifically targeted at those who may be teaching overseas? No, it has not been.

Most academics reported that their preparation for offshore duties was largely informal in nature. Usually, this took the form of pre-travel conversations with colleagues who had taught previously on the program:

> Now with the creation of the OPU within the Faculty, the clarity of purpose there means that they are doing more internally. I mean, there is much more discussion. That is their bread and butter. That is what they do day in, day out, so when you basically sign up for offshore teaching there is a whole lot of informal training that goes on.

The OPU's approach was to provide their staff with experience rather than training. On the whole, this approach appeared to work well. The basis for its effectiveness revealed a recurring and important theme, that of good staff selection. By selecting staff partly on the basis of their international experience, the OPU had precluded the need for a great deal of cross-cultural training for their offshore program managers and academic staff:

> The Faculty has not provided them with any training. It has provided them with heaps of experience, but no formal training as such. Within the OPU, whether they do it

formally or not, I suspect there is probably not a lot that they need by way of training. … One of the main staff members spent a substantial amount of his career managing companies offshore and so he is familiar with the Asian environment. Another has spent three or four years living in the Middle East and has travelled around the world, so again, culturally, he is adaptable.

However, judicious staff selection was only one part of a broader HR strategy for the OPU. This strategy had been created by the Head of the OPU whose area of expertise was international human resource management. In essence, he had applied his knowledge of this area to the way in which the OPU recruited and operated:

> The Head of School's area of expertise is in international HRM. It is an area in which he has written extensively and basically all he is doing is applying his knowledge of the international area.

There was a strong desire expressed by the academics interviewed for training that could formalise the process of experienced academics sharing their knowledge and experiences with the more junior teaching staff:

> Training provided by people who have already been there in the past who have experienced problems, and little discussions from people who said 'Well look, I have been there, I made these mistakes, I could have done it better if I had done it this way'. These things would be really helpful.

There was a healthy presence of three forms of informal support for academics and program managers within the OPU. For a start, the academic managers were well supported at three different management levels, within the OPU, at the Faculty level, and by the University's senior management. In doing so, the OP managers had been empowered and activated to achieve their unit-level goals (Harris & Ogbonna 2003). This approach was appropriate to this services-oriented environment, because it enabled and encouraged the managers, the key employees in the university's transnational education partnerships, to more easily build productive external relationships (Claycomb & Martin 2002).

Case 2 – Research U

As one of Australia's most prestigious universities, Research U is not commonly associated with offshore programs. Indeed, given that it was originally established as a Research Institute, it was unsurprising to find a general absence of commitment to transnational education among the university's senior management team.

Research U is a member of Australia's prestigious Group of Eight universities. Some 60 years ago, the university was established as a research-based institute. Currently, it has over 3,600 staff, of whom slightly more than 500 are academic staff engaged in *both* teaching and research. While these staff cater to the educational needs of almost 14,000 students, Research U continues to pride itself on being a research-intensive institution. Another 750 academic staff devote their time exclusively to research. In this regard, the University has not departed greatly from its original purpose of '… making a major investment in research in Australia'.

On this basis, Research U is markedly different from Regional U, the initial university considered in this paper. Nonetheless, to the extent that it prides itself on an array of research linkages with institutions across Asia and has long promoted itself as having a key focus on the Asia-Pacific region, Research U's sensitivity to cross-cultural issues and associated staff development should arguably be at least moderately consistent with this focus.

The offshore teaching programs of Research U resided in the College of Business. Between 1994 and 2004, the College was given relatively free reign to establish entrepreneurial offshore programs. This activity slowed markedly in the early part of the present decade when the College was forced to pay a heavy price in order to extract itself from its first major offshore venture. It is worth reflecting on this particular experience.

The College's first foray into offshore programs was in 1999 with a Singaporean government body, hereafter referred to as the SGA. The SGA was a multifarious organisation that described itself as an enterprise development agency. In their arrangement with Research U they operated as something akin to a training authority. As such, they were not the active partners in the arrangement and did very little other than endorse Research U's programs for a fee. The active partner in this arrangement was actually a private company based in Singapore and hereafter referred to as SBC. This company was introduced to the College by way of a personal connection with the then Director of the College and the owner of SBC. The original agreement between all three organisations was developed primarily by SBC.

Right from the start, the arrangements did not favour Research U. This was because the university supplied all of the intellectual property, most of which was in the form of course content for its Masters programs. For this they received the relatively small sum of 12.5 per

cent of each enrolled student's tuition fee. For their part, SBC would recruit the students and arrange for the College's teaching material to be taught via contracted lecturers in Singapore, and in some cases in neighbouring countries. Upon completion of the course, the fee-paying students would receive a Research U degree. With none of the teaching undertaken by any of its academics, Research U had very little control over the way in which courses were delivered or, more importantly, their assessment processes.

Thus, in 2004, Research U rationalised its transnational programs, beginning with the termination of its program with SBC in Singapore. The financial penalties imposed as a result of this termination were high. At the same time, Research U also terminated a masters degree in communications being offered to employees of a telecommunications company in China. Despite its popularity, the financial returns to Research U had been similarly lacklustre.

The university's sole continuing offshore program was a postgraduate program in management undertaken in partnership with a local university in Beijing, China. Established in 2004, the program enrolled about 100 students each year and had the requirement that half of its units would be taught by visiting academics from Australia via translators. The program gave more extensive control and moderation to Research U compared to its earlier forays, and has proven to be modestly profitable with returns per student being particularly positive. Accordingly, Research U has given its commitment to continuing the program during the years ahead.

Cross-Cultural Challenges and Obstacles

The potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding in the offshore program context was very high. Most respondents could see that the offshore program environment, by its very nature, presented numerous possibilities for cross-cultural errors by visiting Australian academics. Indeed, the College's academics could see that these cross-cultural challenges impeded not only their efforts to teach effectively in the offshore environment, but also by default, their ability to operate as ambassadors for the university more generally.

Research U's academics needed to be particularly cognisant of Asia's cultural nuances. Those that had travelled to Asia felt that, by virtue of their profession, they were afforded a higher status, more commonly referred to as an 'ascribed' status (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2003). They felt that, on one hand, this had translated into numerous benefits for them, such as greater respect and preferential treatment, however they were also aware that this elevated status came with a responsibility to execute their responsibilities in a manner consistent with the host country's expectations of academics:

> … we have got to not be seen to be just used car salesmen. So there is a role for academics in Asia generally that gives them greater respect, prestige, whatever. So you have got to be careful not to compromise that by being seen to be rather brazenly pushing things in a very commercial way.

By far the majority of the cross-cultural challenges that Research U's academics faced whilst working in offshore programs were grounded in issues of communication. This observation was backed up by the two native Chinese-speaking administrative staff members. As bilingual employees, they had often acted as intermediaries between the partner institution and the College's academics. In this capacity, they had gained some very useful insights into

the cross-cultural misunderstandings that had occurred within the program. In working closely with the College's academics on a wide range of administrative issues, they had noticed that language differences were the source of numerous cross-cultural problems. They had observed, for example, numerous instances of mistranslation, poor pacing of unit content, and the use of culturally inappropriate examples. The observations of these two administrators were thus consistent with Ferraro's (2006) contention about the close relationship between language and culture.

A related issue had to do with Research U's academics encountering an indirect style of communication in Asia. Most of the College's academics used a direct style of communication, appropriate to their low-context home culture (Hall 1976). However, this led to numerous misunderstandings when applied in China, where a more indirect style of communication is preferred (Varner & Beamer 2005).

Translators were used by Research U to breach the communication gap. However, many of the academics were aware that by using a translator they were engaging in a very different mode of teaching, a mode that came with a whole new set of challenges. One of those challenges, for example, arose from the translator's role as a two-way filter for the academic. In this capacity, they needed to ensure proper carriage of the academics' message. As a consequence, most of the academics found it useful to develop a good relationship with the translators so that they could function effectively, both in and out of the classroom. Despite this, they knew that even if an interpreter had been very well managed, they were by no means the panacea for all of the language and communication issues that they encountered in the offshore program.

Food and dining rituals were also recognised as an area of potential cross-cultural significance for the College's academics. From their in-country experience, most of the academics had become aware that food and the dining out experience were an important part of Chinese culture. These academics were not surprised then to receive numerous invitations for both lunch and dinner. Whilst this added to an already hectic teaching schedule, they realised that their Chinese hosts saw this as an important time for getting to know them a little better. As a consequence, the academics usually made a concerted effort to accept as many of these invitations as possible. Once they were out to dinner or lunch they also knew that if they displayed openness to consuming a variety of the local cuisine, of which the Chinese were usually very proud, this pleased their hosts enormously and helped to develop better relations between the parties.

The College's academics were also well aware of the significance of drinking rituals in China. Indeed, most of these academics knew that by participating in drinking rituals, such as the toasts offered during meal times, they would endear themselves to their hosts. However, they were also well aware that this could be perilous given the Chinese proclivity for engaging in numerous toasts in a single outing! During a one to two-week stay, these academics might be asked to go out to dinner almost every evening. As such, many of the respondents found it useful to limit their participation in these rituals in order to function effectively in their daytime transnational teaching tasks.

There was strong support for the notion that preparation lessened the effect of most cross-cultural challenges faced in the offshore setting. For example, a small number of the College's academics had learnt some Mandarin in an effort to overcome some of the communication issues that they faced whilst in China. These academics were convinced that

it had enhanced their ability to perform all of their offshore program roles, including their role as an ambassador for the university. The actions of these academics were thus consistent then with Leask's (2004) belief that those involved in transnational education should consider it a unique and valuable opportunity to engage in intercultural interactions. Nevertheless, the majority of the College's academics were unwilling to commit large amounts of time to these types of initiatives given the general uncertainty surrounding the program's future and the demands on their time imposed by research and local responsibilities.

Training Programs for Transnational Teaching Academics

There was no formal preparation for academics' cross-cultural interactions. All of the academics reported that their preparations for offshore teaching were self-initiated. In other words, when it came to recognising and dealing with cross-cultural differences, they were largely left to their own devices. As such, the College was not being monitored by Research U to ensure that it complied with the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's (2005) more specific recommendations regarding the provision of cross-cultural preparation programs for offshore teaching academics. Interestingly, the lack of formal preparation proved to be less of a problem than might be anticipated because most of the academics had volunteered their participation in the offshore program. In many cases, their motivation to do so arose from either an interest in other national cultures and/or an interest in international business. As such, these academics displayed an intrinsic drive to improve upon their ability to function inter-culturally. Some even went so far as to say that they enjoyed the way these situations tested their ability to think, act and adapt on their feet. This predilection for intercultural exchange was, once again, related to the respondent's work experience prior to joining academia:

> … if I had not been to China before in other professional roles, I think a lot of those cross-cultural issues could potentially have been overwhelming, to the extent of derailing, substantially derailing what I was doing … I was very glad to have had other career projects that had taken me to China previously … Anybody who was dumped in that situation from having done nothing but domestic teaching and research would find it potentially very confronting.

Those respondents that had lived overseas reported that this too had predisposed them to deal with the offshore program's cross-cultural challenges. These academics considered that the experience of living in a foreign country, even if it was a non-Asian country, had conditioned them to cope with a range of cross-cultural challenges. They felt that this experience had conditioned them to seek out mutually satisfactory solutions to the challenges that they faced.

As noted, when it came to preparing for cross-cultural challenges in the offshore environment, the academics were largely left to their own devices. This finding is consistent with Gribble and Ziguras' (2003) investigations into cross-cultural preparations for Australian universities' offshore teaching academics. Under these circumstances, a Research U academic's greatest ally was awareness, garnered through in-country experience. Some clearly relished the opportunity to do this and, as such, were willing to put in the extra effort required to comprehend their host's culture. As a consequence, this minority had managed to develop at least a limited understanding of useful cross-cultural concepts, such as individualism (Parsons & Shils, 1951), collectivism (Triandis, 1995), and high and low cultural contexts (Hall, 1976). More often than not they were rewarded through richer in-country experiences. For the majority, though, senior management's unwillingness to give an

explicit, long-term commitment to offshore programs beyond the relatively-small continuing program in Beijing had dissuaded them from making the same sort of investment of their time and energy.

The senior respondents stated that formal training was not provided because the university's engagement in transnational education was not considered large enough to warrant this sort of expenditure. Additionally, as the extent of the College's financial difficulties became evident over time because of the costs associated with running the earlier offshore programs, funds for these sorts of activities had, in any event, become almost impossible to access.

Whilst acknowledging these financial constraints, many participants could also see the value in having more training for those engaged in the College's offshore program. Interestingly, this view was held most firmly by those respondents with a business background. They were more aware of the academic's representative role whilst engaged in the offshore program:

> … you become aware pretty quickly when you get there, because you are treated like a product of Research U… and so you get a sense … that you are being treated as … a representative of the university.

As a consequence, these respondents could see that would be real value in training, especially if it raised academics' consciousness of the representative aspects of their offshore role.

Those respondents that were in favour of more training were unanimous that it would be more effective if undertaken informally. They anticipated considerable resistance from most academics to any sort of mandatory requirement to attend a formal training program. Much of

this resistance was traced to Research U's academics being under significant pressure to deliver first and foremost on their job goals at their home campus. The respondents were unanimous that this took precedence over any of the academic's offshore-related tasks. Under these circumstances, structured training would probably be perceived as a hindrance to achieving their home campus objectives. As one noted:

> 'You would have … individuals that say, "Why bother with that", especially if it was called training [because] … "I have got far more important things to do with my time".

An informal approach to training was also considered to be more conducive to encouraging a healthy exchange of experiences and ideas. Most respondents, specifically those that were relatively new to offshore teaching, felt that these informal exchanges helped them to better prepare for the reality of their offshore program experience:

> '… definitely informal training. People who have done it should be talking to those who have not, and trying to help them through all of that'.

In summary, participants felt that learning from the personal experiences of others was the best way to comprehend and then deal with the challenges experienced within the inherently dynamic and multifaceted offshore program environment.

Insert Table 1 About Here

CONCLUSION

Regional U was an institution with extensive experience in transnational education. With the passage of time, this had translated into a professionally-organised operation that appeared to be institutionally respected and relatively free of the mistakes that characterised some of Regional's early forays into the provision of offshore programs. In particular, the creation of a discrete entity, the Offshore Programs Unit, represented a case of institutional innovation in response to the demands associated with the high-quality provision of transnational education. Such demands are multiplied when programs are provided in conjunction with international partner organisations.

Another key success factors for Regional U was the selection of employees to manage and administer programs within the OPU who already possessed extensive experience in international business and/or international education. Able to mentor and assist their flexpatriate academic staff, these program managers informally conveyed knowledge about cross-cultural challenges, promoted cross-cultural awareness among academic flexpatriates, and enjoyed the respect of their overseas counterparts as a result of their maturity and experience.

In addition, Regional U's deliberate decision to undertake transnational education with English as the exclusive language of study meant that a plethora of possible communications problems were generally avoided. While some cross-cultural differences remained, including differing views about the grading standards to be applied to offshore students, such

differences were generally managed well at Regional U through its focused approach delivered via the OPU.

To the extent that additional cross-cultural training and development was perceived to be required, this was stated the study's participants to best occur via the "formalisation of informalisation", or a move to the semi or quasi-structuring of informal opportunities to network, share knowledge, and enhance organisational learning.

In contrast, Research U experienced greater cross-cultural communications challenges because its programs were taught in Mandarin using translators. Academics perceived that the filtering effects of two-way translation created the potential for numerous misunderstandings and an inevitable degree of patchiness in program quality given the additional channel of communication placed between academics and their students.

Research U's transnational academics also suffered from their identification with a program viewed by the university as being peripheral and tangential to the core business of research. In addition, the fact that earlier programs had been terminated at a substantial cost to the university gave the offshore program the status of a "poor relation" among the university community.

Nonetheless, the program appeared to be relatively healthy in terms of its ongoing academic and financial health, assisted by its limited size, the presence of Mandarin-speaking

administrative staff in the College of Business, and by the ongoing use of internationally-experienced academics for the offshore teaching elements of the program. Consistent with the views expressed by the academics of Regional U, the participants in the Research U study expressed a desire for additional opportunities to undertake informal learning and development in order to enhance their offshore roles.

The preference for informal learning is consistent with the view that academics generally dislike being forced to do anything beyond that which they prefer. As Chang (2007) has argued, a sense of participation and ownership is usually required for academics to self-select into such activities.

In summary, while not generally formalised by policy, the maturity of their offshore programs led these universities to select offshore academic staff on the basis of their suitability for such appointments. Previous experience in previous offshore visits or via international business careers had accordingly created a degree of best practise in international HRM in this respect. Like their corporate counterparts, however, deficiencies remained in creating opportunities for informal learning, networking, and mentoring. Given that many academics will tire, over time, of going offshore, particularly if they are to continue to pursue their research agendas, the failure to "formalise the informal" may result in a cadre of younger lecturers who enter transnational education without sufficient cross-cultural familiarity, awareness, and sensitivity.

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Table 1 Summary of Case Study Findings

	Responses and Themes
Regional U	***Cross-Cultural Challenges and Obstacles*** • While language and other communication issues posed significant challenges, the decision to teach only in English overcame some of the language challenges and reaped longer-term rewards for Regional U • Good staff selection helped to minimise the number and magnitude of the cross-cultural difficulties the Offshore Programs Unit (OPU) faced • The OPU's long-term commitment helped minimise cross-cultural management problems in the Asian context
	Training Programs for Offshore Teaching Academics • Regional U had good training infrastructure but not used for broader staff training • OPU preferred to select staff that needed little or no broader training
Research U	***Cross-Cultural Challenges and Obstacles*** • Ready acceptance that the numerous cross-cultural challenges need to be addressed to become effective ambassadors for their institution • Communication-related issues were by far the greatest cross-cultural challenge encountered by academics • Preparation was identified as the key to minimising a wide range of cross-cultural issues • The College of Business preferred not to have any formal processes for preparing their academics • Academics who had lived overseas were often better prepared to deal with a range of cross-cultural challenges
	Training Programs for Offshore Teaching Academics • Small size of the College's offshore program meant that formal training could not be justified • General consensus that an informal approach was more effective, given that a culture of sharing prevailed within the College • More important that the right staff is selected in the first place rather than attempting to train inappropriate staff