

On a collision course

Cutting corners will come back to bite education suppliers, writes **Sarah Russell**

Questions are often asked about the quality of education for overseas students at Australian universities. Do different assessment standards apply to overseas students? Are overseas students treated as "cash cows"? These questions also need to be asked when Australian university courses are taught in overseas campuses.

I recently taught a Masters Degree course to overseas students in their own country. This experience provided a glimpse of our offshore educational activities. I was shocked by the low academic standard of the Masters Degree unit. I was also frustrated by the home university's managerial approach to their overseas students. This brief overseas teaching experience suggests that some Australian universities may be treating overseas students as economic units, not genuine students.

A week before classes were scheduled to commence, a unit coordinator informed his head of school that he was unable to travel overseas to teach the unit. His university colleagues with expertise in the academic area were also unavailable. Rather than cancel the unit, the head of school searched for someone external to the university to travel overseas and teach the unit.

I received a phone call from the head of school at 8pm on a Tuesday night. I had never met anyone from this university, so the phone call was somewhat of a surprise. The head of school asked about my availability to travel overseas to teach the following week. With a researcher's curiosity, I agreed to a short term teaching contract.

The head of school efficiently organised business matters, such as salary and travel reimbursements. However, all emails seeking information about the academic content of the unit were forwarded to junior staff. This created a buzz of busy-ness. However, it took three days to learn the title of the unit, four days to discover the unit's aims and objectives and six days to receive the correct teaching materials. This was not an ideal preparation.

Finally, the day before my departure, an interstate courier delivered the unit guide. I had no choice but to read the unit guide on the plane. I was genuinely shocked. The unit guide was certainly not at a Masters level. The low academic standard was most evident in the assessment tasks that had been set – two essays that required mostly regurgitation, not analytical skills. To make matters worse, the reading material had not been kept up-to-date.

The overseas students were all experienced health care professionals who had paid a substantial amount of money to enroll as postgraduate students in an Australian university. When I learnt exactly how much each student had paid, I began to question the decision not to cancel the course. Although such decisions are influenced by many factors, it seemed likely that this decision was based more on economic, than educational, principles.

Within our current managerial culture, it is not surprising that some Australian universities are developing an international reputation as places where full-fee paying students can 'buy' a degree. However, the students taking this particular unit were not seeking to 'buy' an easy Australian degree. They were seeking genuine postgraduate education. They expected the university to provide it.

Although postgraduate education is commonly based on adult learning principles, the unit coordinator recommended a didactic approach because of 'cultural factors'. Delivering educational material in a didactic way is foreign to me, so I replaced the overhead transparencies with discussion and critical debate. When the students began to enthusiastically reflect on their work practice and engage in critical debates about current health care policies, it was clear that cultural factors did not impede the unit being delivered as a genuine postgraduate unit.

The unit is delivered didactically in both Australia and overseas. However, separate unit guides are published – one for domestic students, the other for overseas students. The unit coordinator was adamant that the academic material, and assessment tasks, were not 'dumbed down' for overseas students. The same academic standards applied to both local and overseas students. It seems, therefore, that the 'dumbing down' was global.

In this Masters Degree course, lowering standards for the global market resulted in lower academic standards for both overseas and local students. Although this has serious implications for the quality of the Australian tertiary education system, the implications for overseas students is less dire. Those who want to learn, and engage with, principles of genuine scholarship will simply go elsewhere for their education.

Sarah Russell is the Principal Researcher at Research Matters in Melbourne.