Expatriate academics and transnational teaching: the need for quality assurance and quality enhancement to go hand in hand

Antonia M. Lamers-Reeuwijk, Wilfried F. Admiraal and Roeland M. van der Rijst

ICLON, Leiden University Leiden, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, transnational education has been increasing and so has the need for staff to teach on these programmes. This study sought the views of non-Anglophone expatriate academics teaching transnationally in Oman by means of a survey and follow-up interviews. It highlights the challenges that they face in a teaching and learning environment that is academically and culturally new to them. These challenges relate mostly to the students, as they need extensive structured guidance, and to maintaining programme quality in meeting the learning outcomes, particularly critical thinking and writing in English. Teaching adaptation and quality assurance were less challenging. Findings indicate that for a more enhanced teaching and learning environment, both the provider and host institution need to continuously invest in face-to-face professional development addressing the challenges expatriate academics experience, and that the sole focus on quality assurance by provider universities is not sufficient to create this.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2018
Accepted 4 September 2019

KEYWORDS

Expatriate academics; transnational education; quality; teaching challenges; Oman

Introduction

The proliferation of transnational education (TNE) over the past twenty years of programmes delivered overseas to ever-increasing student numbers (British Council, 2016) has led to a rising demand for staff teaching the TNE students. TNE is highly developed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which consist of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, with among the highest levels of TNE enrolments of any region worldwide, mostly on undergraduate programmes (Universities UK International, 2017). With some 20,000 TNE students in UK programmes during 2017/2018, the number is quite substantial in Oman, the focus of this study. In the GCC countries, it is quite common to recruit non-Anglophone expatriate staff to teach on these programmes while they rarely have prior experience in a Western university, neither as students nor as teaching staff. In Oman, expatriate academics form a considerable majority of the teaching staff in TNE. Several studies have
pointed at the unique challenges for TNE teaching staff as they work in an environment that is new to them academically, culturally, and sometimes, also, linguistically, as they may not have taught in English previously (Dobos, 2011; Hoare, 2013; Leask, 2005). Issues regarding teaching quality in TNE in Oman have been identified in the quality audits conducted by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority between 2009 and 2018.

Similarly, but from a different point of view, teaching-related challenges were identified by UK higher education TNE providers in O’Mahony’s 2014 survey. The local teaching and learning experience was one of their concerns, and seen as a potential risk to the UK providers’ reputation and the quality of the programme delivery. There is, however, a paucity of research into the experience and views of expatriate teaching staff in TNE. Such research is not only necessary to gain an insight into the quality issues, but also to better align induction and professional development with the challenges they face in this teaching and learning environment. This study builds on O’Mohany’s survey, and TNE is here defined as the provision of education to students in a country other than where the provider is located (McNamara & Knight, 2016), with the following key elements applicable: the local higher education institution (HEI) teaching staff provide academic support; teaching staff are expatriates residing in the host country; and the distance HEI provides the programmes, qualification, and quality assurance (Knight, 2016).

**Teaching quality and quality assurance in TNE**

Most transnational programmes use teaching resources that are produced by the provider university in order to ensure consistency wherever they are offered. Yet, what transnational students value is the quality of the teaching and learning environment with sufficient peer-contact, and support given by teaching staff, far more than the reputation of the provider university or the programme per se (Ziguras, 2008a). Expatriate or local teaching staff have no or little say in the development of these curricula, and it is left to them how they contextualise these and make them relevant for students with very different educational and cultural backgrounds (Ziguras, 2008b). Although they may be skilled teachers in their home countries, they need to transform their current practice and adapt to the local context (Leask, 2005). This transition to a new local teaching and learning environment raises the question of how they can ensure that transnational programme delivery is culturally appropriate (Ziguras, 2008a) and sufficiently contextualised for students to be able to link new concepts to their society or workplace (Hoare, 2013).

Australia and the UK are the world’s main providers of TNE programmes and most of the research into TNE is conducted by Australian or UK academics, including research into teaching skills. Leask (2005) listed 16 essential characteristics of transnational teachers on Australian programmes, nine of which relate to teaching skills, with one deemed to be unique to the TNE classroom: the ability to adapt learning activities in response to offshore students. Similarly, Dobos (2011) concluded that teaching practice could only be adapted in response to the needs of the transnational students. Teaching featured prominently in the survey O’Mahony (2014) conducted among senior staff of TNE providers in the UK, which revealed that they perceived local teaching styles as one of the most challenging aspects of delivering their programmes overseas. The term ‘local teaching styles’ was not specified in O’Mahony’s survey, but a notable minority of 30% reported teaching as ‘worse’ or ‘slightly worse’ compared with teaching at their HEI in the UK. There are a
few TNE studies that describe the characteristics associated with local teaching styles. What Bovill, Jordan, and Watters (2015) found in Iraq was that many staff members took a transfer of knowledge approach to teaching, and Dobos (2011) likewise identified that many academics (Malaysian and expat) came from a teacher-centred approach to teaching, and found it challenging to adopt a more student-centred approach.

TNE is one of the strategies of internationalisation, and themes described in the literature about TNE and internationalisation therefore overlap to some extent. Many studies recognise that academic staff, whether teaching in TNE or teaching international students at home, need to be efficient intercultural learners (Hoare, 2013; Leask, 2005). For this, they would, first of all, need to be aware of their own cultural identity, and accept and value cultural differences in the classroom. They can then recognise and anticipate cultural barriers that may exist for students to participate in class. Dimitrov and Haque (2016) propose a model of intercultural teaching competencies that include some components that are of particular importance to TNE. Especially when teaching students who are culturally different from the lecturer, there needs to be an awareness among lecturers that they themselves and their students may have different perceptions of power distance and of what is appropriate behaviour both inside and outside the classroom. Anglo-Saxon programmes presume a student-centred approach, focusing on the learning process and requiring high student participation levels, be it with other students or the lecturer (Quan, Smailes, & Fraser, 2013; Ryan, 2011). Therefore, teaching staff need to have the ability to adapt their established teaching practice (Smith, 2009; Robson, 2011) in response to the programmes and students being taught and to mentor students to what may very well be a new academic culture to them.

Lecturers in TNE also need to have particular personal attributes such as being approachable, patient and taking a non-judgemental approach to cultural differences (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Leask, 2005). Ryan (2011) maintains that teaching staff, also, need to recognise that just because their students might be different, that this does not automatically make them deficient. For a long time, a deficit approach towards international students has been taken by lecturers, describing them in terms of lacking in critical thinking skills and being passive learners. Ryan calls instead for recognition of similarities across cultures and the potential for common ground and learning. In this respect, she argues that self-reflection is a crucial competency for staff teaching in TNE to have, as it ‘forces a rethinking of one’s own cultural knowledge, values and perspectives’.

As provider universities are mostly Anglo-Saxon, the English language is the predominant medium of instruction in TNE. This poses challenges to both the lecturers and the students. Native speakers and expat teaching staff need to be aware that their students are learning in a second, or sometimes even third, language (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Murray, 2012) so they need to be competent in tailoring the language they use to the different levels of linguistic proficiency of the students. This may include explaining and paraphrasing new discipline-specific vocabulary to their students using contextualised examples that students can relate to, thereby ensuring students have more than one opportunity to understand the concept (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). Moreover, when teaching staff come from different countries, students are exposed to English spoken with many different accents. Using English as a medium of instruction puts certain demands on lecturers’ own language proficiency; therefore, the requirement that TNE programmes are taught and assessed in English is in itself no guarantee for quality if both the academics
and students are operating in a language which is not their first; in fact, it can be a threat to those programmes (Dobos, 2011).

Generally, there seems to be a lack of pre-departure preparation and/or training for teaching in transnational education (Gribble & Ziguras, 2010; Smith, 2009) and after-arrival support seems to rely on informal networks. Participants in those studies identified a personal need for institutional support in the form of continuing professional development that is specifically directed at the new environment in which they work. Rather than individuals learning through trial and error, and teachers independently altering their pedagogy (Prowse & Goddard, 2010), more emphasis on the development of effective academic practice in transnational education is suggested by Keevers et al. (2014) together with opportunities to discuss and share issues with colleagues.

With regards to quality, a distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, the quality of the teaching and learning environment, and on the other, the assurance of consistent academic standards (Sharp, 2017). When the provider university is the awarding body, there is a need to assure that the quality of the programme delivery in TNE is equivalent. This is of particular importance for the assessments and a rigorous regime is maintained in order to ensure that the standards that apply in the home country are also followed in the host country. Where assessments are concerned, the provider university usually functions as the sole reference point for quality (Pyvis, 2011). Yet while both Pyvis and Sharp recognise the need for robust academic standards, they argue in favour of measures of educational quality that are both context and culturally sensitive, allowing for local variations in the teaching and learning environment which are responsive to the needs and values of the students in transnational higher education. Despite repeated calls for the need for culturally and contextually appropriate international education, few quality assurance frameworks have developed indicators for assuring the contextualisation of foreign programmes in the host country (Latchem & Ryan, 2013), and Oman is a case in point.

The literature overview above indicates that there are issues specific for TNE with regards to quality assurance and quality enhancement of the teaching and learning environment. The context in which this case study took place is a medium-sized private college illustrative of TNE in Oman and also in the Gulf region. The first aim of this study was to investigate to what extent teaching quality, professional development, and staff induction are nationwide issues in institutions offering TNE in Oman. Accordingly, this study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are the specific challenges experienced by the expatriate teaching staff?
- To what extent do these challenges impact on the quality of the TNE teaching and learning environment?

**Method**

**Research context**

Additional desk research was conducted in order to place this study into a wider perspective. The number of transnational students studying wholly overseas for a UK higher education qualification in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2017/2018 is quite substantial, as shown in Table 1 below.
Oman actively encourages quality-assured higher education in the private sector as it increases access for local students, both school leavers and mature students, to higher education. For private HEIs, it is mandatory to be affiliated with an accredited and approved university abroad (Universities UK international, 2017) and the UK forms the largest provider in Oman. Programmes need prior approval from the Ministry of Higher Education. Expatriate academics need to have a minimum of three years’ teaching experience in higher education and a relevant degree at Master’s or PhD level, and their CVs need to be approved by both the Ministry and the provider university.

In the GCC countries, it is common to recruit non-Anglophone expatriate academics to teach in TNE, and in Oman they outnumber Omani academic staff by about 4:1 (Table 2).

The vast majority of expatriate teaching staff in this study originate from non-Western countries such as India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, and some from the MENA region. From 2016 onwards, a few Omani lecturers joined as well. The number of lecturers almost doubled between 2015 and 2018.

As a preliminary step towards national accreditation, which started in 2017, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority conducted quality audits of all 59 HEIs in Oman, 21 of which are private. The quality audit reports provide formative feedback to the HEIs for nine broad areas of activities. OAAA’s Quality Audit Manual (2008) outlines that HEIs need to ensure and evaluate teaching quality. As this study is concerned with teaching quality, and its implications for professional development and staff induction in TNE, the 21 quality audit reports of the private HEIs were analysed for these criteria (Table 3).

If the recommendations and affirmations are taken together, professional development has been the biggest concern over the years (in 81% of these private HEIs), followed by teaching quality (67%), then staff induction (48%). These areas for improvement may have been identified, yet it remains unclear what the expatriate academics themselves perceive as challenges in teaching transnationally. This insight is important for both professional development and staff induction, as the lecturers are ultimately the ones who will need to implement changes and enhance the quality in their daily work.

Most of the lecturers in this college have been part of a major drive towards quality enhancement in teaching, learning and assessments instigated early 2014 and still continuing. The elements of this academic development resemble Gibbs’ overview of educational development (2013) to a large extent, from an initial focus on individual lecturers towards spreading best practice across the institution. They teach UK

### Table 1. TNE students in MENA region.

| Country                   | Number of students in TNE |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Oman                      | 20,645                    |
| Egypt                     | 20,480                    |
| United Arab Emirates      | 18,120                    |
| Saudi Arabia              | 9,465                     |
| Kuwait                    | 6,845                     |
| Bahrain                   | 3,405                     |
| Qatar                     | 2,530                     |
| Lebanon                   | 2,420                     |
| Jordan                    | 1,675                     |

Data extracted on 29 March 2019 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/chart-5
undergraduate programmes to predominantly Omani students (97%), mostly mature students who are already in employment, and school leavers.

This study presents the views of in total 71 questionnaire respondents who are mainly expatriate staff (96%), none of whom are native speakers of English, delivering UK programmes in the faculties of Computing Studies (FCS) and of Business and Management Studies (FBMS). With the exception of two lecturers, none of the lecturers had prior experience of a UK programme either as a student or a lecturer. One other lecturer did a long-distance PhD with a UK university.

Data collection

The research is based on two sets of primary data collected at the host institution delivering UK programmes. First, a questionnaire was used in 2015 and repeated in 2018 for the new staff. All new academic staff who had arrived after the date on which the 2015 survey was conducted were approached in 2018 and invited to take part. Lecturers were asked, based on their experience in TNE, to rate how challenging they found 20 statements (with 1 = not challenging; 2 = slightly challenging; 3 = challenging; and 4 = very challenging). These statements were partly based on O’Mahony’s 2014 survey and, following an inductive approach, supplemented by the challenges that emerged from consultation sessions that the first author held with all academics after more than 200 h of teaching observations between 2014–2016. The response rates were 85% (n = 26 in FBMS; 11 in FCS) in 2015 and 86% (n = 24 in FBMS; n = 10 in FCS) in 2018. The respondents added no other challenges in the comments box. Secondly, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of these challenges, the first author approached 13 expatriate lecturers to participate in semi-structured interviews, one of whom turned down the

### Table 2. Expatriate academics teaching in private higher education institutions in Oman.

| Academic year | Expatriate | Omani |
|---------------|------------|-------|
| 2012–2013     | 1581       | 363   |
| 2013–2014     | 1822       | 438   |
| 2014–2015     | 1979       | 462   |
| 2015–2016     | 2074       | 529   |

Source National Centre for Statistics & Information; data extracted on 29 March 2019 from [https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Elibrary/Pages/LibraryContentView.aspx](https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Elibrary/Pages/LibraryContentView.aspx)

### Table 3. Quality Audits conducted between 2009 and 2018.

| Country of affiliation | Teaching quality | # | Professional development | # | Staff induction | # |
|------------------------|------------------|---|--------------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| UK                     | Commendation     | 11| Commendation             | 3 | Commendation    | 3 |
| USA                    | Affirmation      | 5 | Affirmation              | 2 | Affirmation     | 1 |
| India                  | Recommendation   | 2 | Recommendation           | 12| Recommendation  | 9 |
| Jordan                 |                  | 2 |                         |   |                 |   |
| Lebanon                |                  | 2 |                         |   |                 |   |
| Germany                |                  | 1 |                         |   |                 |   |
| Australia              |                  | 1 |                         |   |                 |   |

Percentage of private HEIs where issues were raised:

- UK: 67%
- USA: 81%
- India: 48%

NB – some have more than 1 affiliation

Source Oman Academic Accreditation Authority; data extracted on 3 August 2018 from [http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_ReviewDwnld](http://www.oaaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_ReviewDwnld)
invitation. They were approached based on a proportionate representation of nationalities, an equal gender distribution, and varying experience in TNE (Table 4).

The first author asked the remaining 12 how they interpreted each questionnaire statement, how certain aspects are different in TNE in comparison to their home country, how they adapted, and what they found challenging aspects of supporting students. All lecturers received a transcript of their interview and were asked if it presented their views accurately and whether they wanted to add or change anything, but none of them did so.

**Data analysis**

The interviews lasted about 45–60 min each and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. After reiterative reading, the transcripts were analysed for what aspects lecturers found challenging and why this was the case, first per interview, then across per statement and subsequently per category, with several months in between each phase. In the first phase, each transcript was coded on broad themes, then for sub-topics in the second phase. The third phase included a calculation for internal reliability of each category in the questionnaire using Cronbach’s alpha and two items were moved to a different category. These adjustments were included in the third phase of coding the transcripts per category. In order to analyse the results we use descriptive and inferential statistics, which enable researchers to interpret what these descriptions mean and how prevalent they are; to make inferences about the wider population; and qualitative interpretations of the interviews by clustering items into categories (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

**Results and discussion**

The overall results between 2015 and 2018 and between the two faculties were very similar (independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences in mean scores of all 20 statements with $\alpha = 0.0025$). The scores mostly (81%) fall in the ‘challenging’ bracket range of 2.50–3.25. Therefore, we discuss the findings below as an aggregate ($n = 71$). The statements are clustered around four cross-themes: challenges that are related to

| Degree | Faculty: | Years of teaching experience | Years of experience in TNE |
|--------|---------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Master’s | FBMS*   | 13                           | 4                          |
| PhD    |         | 24                           | 7                          |
| Master’s |         | 21                           | 11                         |
| PhD    |         | 25                           | 5                          |
| Master’s |         | 7                            | 3                          |
| PhD    |         | 15                           | 1                          |
| Master’s |         | 8                            | 2                          |
| Master’s | FCS**   | 12                           | 8                          |
| Master’s |         | 9                            | 4                          |
| Master’s |         | 6                            | 6                          |
| Master’s |         | 7                            | 4                          |
| PhD    |         | 17                           | 6                          |

*Faculty of Business & Management Studies.

**Faculty of Computing Sciences.**
students, to programme quality, to teaching adaptation, and to quality assurance. The results are shown in Table 5.

The questionnaire responses were analysed for internal reliability of the four underlying categories using Cronbach’s alpha (α) as a measure of the internal consistency amongst the items, with values above 0.70 considered to be reliable (Cohen et al., 2011). The questionnaire results show that those aspects that relate to the students were found to be the most challenging (overall mean: 2.94; SD between the two faculties

| Table 5. Questionnaire Results. |
|-------------------------------|
| Student related aspects       | 2015 | 2018 | mean | 2015 | 2018 | mean | SD 2 | faculties |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 3 Different student styles of learning | 2.65 | 2.67 | 2.66 | 3.20 | 3.30 | 3.25 | 0.42 |
| 6 Different students’ expectations of the role of the lecturer | 2.52 | 2.58 | 2.55 | 2.82 | 3.10 | 2.96 | 0.29 |
| 8 The amount of support students need in the learning process | 3.24 | 2.96 | 3.10 | 3.36 | 2.80 | 3.08 | 0.01 |
| 20 Getting students to utilise their independent learning hours | 3.08 | 2.78 | 2.93 | 3.45 | 2.40 | 2.93 | 0.00 |
| mean of mean                  | 2.81 | 3.05 | 0.17 |
| Programme quality             |
| 9 Achieving the intended learning outcomes | 2.62 | 2.57 | 2.59 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 0.29 |
| 10 Online access to the UK library | 2.46 | 2.18 | 2.32 | 3.11 | 2.44 | 2.78 | 0.32 |
| 11 Supporting students’ in developing critical thinking skills | 3.08 | 2.96 | 3.02 | 3.27 | 3.00 | 3.14 | 0.08 |
| 12 Supporting students in applying theory to practice | 2.92 | 2.92 | 2.92 | 3.27 | 2.80 | 3.04 | 0.08 |
| 17 Balancing teaching and research | 3.32 | 2.61 | 2.96 | 3.18 | 3.10 | 3.14 | 0.12 |
| 18 Finding opportunities to give students formative feedback | 2.88 | 2.29 | 2.59 | 2.64 | 2.10 | 2.37 | 0.16 |
| mean of mean                  | 2.73 | 2.91 | 0.12 |
| Teaching adaptation           |
| 2 Adapting my style of teaching | 2.46 | 2.38 | 2.42 | 2.73 | 2.80 | 2.76 | 0.24 |
| 4 Tailoring module content to the Omani context | 2.88 | 2.54 | 2.71 | 3.10 | 3.00 | 3.05 | 0.24 |
| 13 Teaching morning students | 2.77 | 2.74 | 2.75 | 2.55 | 2.80 | 2.67 | 0.06 |
| 14 Teaching evening students | 2.46 | 2.57 | 2.51 | 2.82 | 2.60 | 2.71 | 0.14 |
| 19 Finding opportunities to share best practice with colleagues in the college | 2.31 | 2.13 | 2.22 | 2.70 | 2.30 | 2.50 | 0.20 |
| mean of mean                  | 2.52 | 2.74 | 0.15 |
| Quality assurance             |
| 1 Getting familiar with the British education system | 2.58 | 2.67 | 2.62 | 2.20 | 2.60 | 2.40 | 0.16 |
| 5 External quality control by the UK university | 2.65 | 2.75 | 2.70 | 3.00 | 2.50 | 2.75 | 0.03 |
| 15 Communication with the UK university | 2.08 | 2.41 | 2.25 | 2.11 | 2.40 | 2.26 | 0.01 |
| 16 Reconciling what the faculty expects from me and what the UK university expects from me | 2.58 | 2.30 | 2.44 | 2.30 | 2.70 | 2.50 | 0.04 |
| mean of mean                  | 2.50 | 2.48 |
0.17; \(\alpha 0.770\), closely followed by maintaining the programme quality (2.83; SD 0.12; \(\alpha 0.773\)). Teaching adaptation was found to be less of a challenge (2.63; SD 0.15; \(\alpha 0.804\)), with quality assurance the least challenging (2.49; SD 0.02; \(\alpha 0.843\)). Statement 7 (students’ level of English) was deleted as it decreased the internal reliability of any one category considerably.

The order in which the categories are presented below follows the level of challenge as perceived by the respondents to the questionnaire, and the interviewees indicated how they have an impact on the quality of the teaching and learning environment. In their views, aspects related to the students and maintaining the programme quality are challenging aspects of their work. Teaching adaptation and quality assurance are less challenging. These challenges provide indications for the priorities in induction and professional development programmes aimed at quality enhancement.

**Aspects related to the students**

All interviewees said that students expect lecturers to structure and explain things well beyond the new topics in class, such as vocabulary and what to do for independent learning, to provide extensive guidelines for assignments and a list of reliable websites, and to explain how to upload assignments or how to check for plagiarism. Where students’ learning styles are concerned, the two faculties’ opinions varied most (standard deviation 0.42). What may account for this difference is that students do not always start their studies with the prerequisite knowledge the UK programme assumes they have, an issue that was brought up by all interviewees from FCS, but much less so in FBMS. When some lecturers asked students about their previous education, they learned that students were not expected to ask questions, feeling more comfortable asking their classmates for clarification, and to memorise rather than comprehend concepts. There is a paucity of research into the learning styles of students in the Gulf region. Two such studies into the learning styles and cultural dimensions amongst Qatari students in Canadian programmes (Lemke-Westcott & Johnson, 2013; Prowse & Goddard, 2010) noted that students need extensive structured guidance, an aspect observed by the academics in Oman as well. Students may be at a disadvantage when it comes to the expectations of the new learning environment and this learning style focusing on memorisation may negatively affect students’ performance. As one lecturer said, ‘They don’t know in how many ways they can improve their own learning process’. Lecturers need to recognise both the barriers students may face in participating in class and the different student perceptions of power distance (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). For newly hired expatriate academics, it can be a particularly daunting task to support students in the transition to an academic culture that is new to both parties.

**Aspects related to maintaining programme quality**

Following Sharp’s distinction (2017), this category is about the quality of the teaching and learning environment. This was the aspect that the leaders of TNE providers (O’Mahony, 2014) considered a potential risk to their programmes and it is partly confirmed by the Quality Audit findings where, in 67% of the private HEIs, teaching quality was identified as an area for improvement. The UK programmes are described in terms of learning
outcomes and lecturers talked at length about the challenges of achieving these learning outcomes particularly at higher levels, for example, in applying theory to practice and developing critical thinking skills. All participants said specifically that they see it as their job to model this skill in class, set up learning tasks such as debates and discussions or critical reading of a passage, usually in small groups, taking a learning-centred approach because ‘when you only deliver the materials, you will definitely not make them think critically at all’. However, the challenge of developing critical thinking is not restricted to transnational education, as Hammer and Green (2011) report in their case study in Australia with first year students (25% international students).

In addition, students are assessed in English, yet less than half of the lecturers stated they see it as their responsibility to address English language issues in exams. Only two of them practise writing long answers with their students in class, particularly how to organise answers. Five lecturers keep track of students’ performance in exams, and provide learning tasks based on their analysis. They identified the lack of critical writing in exam answers and this is where students seem particularly disadvantaged, echoing Smith’s (2011) findings with international students in the UK. With a Ministry requirement for academics to have an English language proficiency level equivalent to an IELTS 6 only, they may not even be in a position to support the development of their students’ English. This lack of subject-specific language support by academic staff from non-Anglophone countries may be a potential threat to the programmes they teach (Dobos, 2011). Thus, English language proficiency becomes a double-edged sword when lecturers’ own proficiency is not adequate to support students in developing academic literacy (Murray, 2012).

**Aspects related to teaching adaptation**

Five lecturers specifically stated they changed their teaching style and adopted a student-centred approach. Another adjustment lecturers make is to speak more slowly and adjust their vocabulary when students’ basic subject knowledge and subject-specific vocabulary in English are not good enough yet. As studies elsewhere, including in TNE, have shown, teaching in another culture requires changes in pedagogy (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Eaves, 2011; Lemke-Westcott & Johnson, 2013). Furthermore, it is a matter for concern that four lecturers equate achieving the learning outcomes with delivering the content, which suggests they take a teacher-centred approach focusing on information transmission (Biggs, 2012; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004).

The UK university supplies slides used for each module and the expectation is that lecturers tailor the module content to the local context, in this case Oman. Six lecturers recognise the importance of contextualisation for the students, reflecting Hoare’s (2013) study in Singapore, with the additional requisite of the materials to be sensitive to the local culture and religion, and some specifically state that assessments need to be contextualised as well. However, there are some modules that cannot be contextualised as there may be professional standards set by global bodies (e.g., accounting, Cisco).

The rapid growth in student numbers in TNE in Oman, like elsewhere in the Gulf (Smith, 2009), together with an increase in new staff, places high demands on academic developers to provide continuous professional development (CPD). The Quality Audits highlight the necessity of CPD for both existing and new staff in practically all the
private HEIs. This college has experienced rapid growth with staff numbers doubling in 3 years, and students arriving in new cohorts every semester. It has invested in the academic development of the teaching staff through deliberate quality enhancement activities over the past five years. As other studies have shown, the shift towards a student-centred approach focusing on the learning process requires time, effort and resources (Bovill et al, 2015; Dobos, 2011; Guskey, 2002; Jordan et al., 2013; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). These CPD activities included teaching observations followed by constructive, one-to-one feedback and peer discussions were facilitated, which are all are seen as particularly valuable (Locke, Whitchurch, Smith, & Mazenod, 2014) and may account for why this aspect was perceived as only slightly challenging.

Aspects related to quality assurance

Initially, the quality assurance process, with assessment approval by the internal verifier in the partner university, second marking, the external examiners approving the marks, and the documentation required, was new to all expatriate academics and came as a shock since they had previously had complete autonomy in this respect. Yet they all realised after one or two semesters that this quality assurance was a thorough and robust system and that standards were thus maintained across the programmes. Practically all lecturers perceived external quality control by the UK university (including the external examiners) as very useful and said they learned a lot in the process. Four lecturers specifically said that they learned how to align their assessments with the learning outcomes of the modules they teach. In this college, quality assurance is therefore mostly seen as an enabler rather than just red tape (Hughes & Thomas, 2017) and face-to-face communication regarding their modules and assessments with UK staff is considered important for expatriate academics. With practically all of the lecturers saying they learned much from visiting partner university staff and external examiners, this quality assurance process has contributed to a transformation of their practice, particularly with regards to setting assessments and marking moderation. They regret that the boards are now conducted in a plenary session through videoconference as it deprives them of the opportunity to individually discuss their modules and assessments with UK visiting staff. This indicates that, although videoconferencing may be cheaper, personal and timely communication and relationship building are vital to quality assurance leading to quality enhancement (Keay, May, & O’Mahony, 2014; Pyvis, 2011). A context such as this one, with many new expatriate or Omani academic staff, warrants the expense of regular face-to-face consultation with UK staff regarding modules and assessments as an essential part of quality assurance, since this makes a valuable contribution to their on-going professional development.

The centre for quality enhancement, set up in January 2015, was responsible for the quality enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment across the college, and worked independently but in close cooperation with the deputy dean for quality assurance and the academic registrar. It started supporting lecturers using the data from the academic registry office for learning analytics thereby identifying which students are at risk and which modules are at risk (low pass rate). This constant monitoring and evaluation of outcomes is essential for quality assurance of TNE programmes (Castle & Kelly, 2004).
Conclusions and recommendations

Although this study deals with one private institution, the research context described here with mostly non-Anglophone academics teaching UK programmes to local students is not uncommon in Oman or in the Gulf region (Wilkins & Neri, 2018). Based on the questionnaire and the interviews in this study, the survey amongst UK providers of TNE and the OAAA quality audits, there seems to be agreement that the quality of the teaching and learning environment in the host institution is a challenging aspect.

Considering that the survey results did not differ much between 2015 and 2018 when staff numbers had almost doubled, this underlines the need for continuous quality enhancement in the form of an extensive in-house professional development programme and good support during the induction period in the host institution. Foci for professional development are often decided upon by the UK university (quality assurance), or in response to quality audits (teaching quality), but not so much in response to the challenges perceived by the academics concerned. In such a programme, more attention needs to be paid to what they consider the most challenging aspects, namely those related to students and maintaining programme quality.

The quality assurance of the whole assessment cycle of the programmes offered, whilst absolutely necessary, is in itself not sufficient for guaranteeing a teaching and learning environment that is comparable to that of the provider institution. We therefore recommend academic registry, quality assurance and quality enhancement to be an integrated team with institutional data and learning analytics continuously informing professional development needs. Thus, quality enhancement at an individual level through professional development is reinforced by quality enhancement at an institutional level (Williams, 2016), thus leading to a more equivalent teaching and learning environment.

We also recommend that transnational education providers move more explicitly from providing programmes and quality assurance towards supporting quality enhancement as well. Particularly if the higher education system of the provider and its tacit assumptions of the academic culture are alien to both staff and students, support in terms of professional development and quality enhancement embedded in the host institution is essential for the quality of the teaching and learning environment, and provisions for this should be included in the contract. The Quality Assurance Agency states in their UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2011) that

…. the fundamental principle underpinning all arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with others is 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.

Echoing the British Council report (2016), in a context such as the one described here, we argue in favour of a champion of the provider university within the host institution, somebody with enough seniority, expertise and credibility to drive change and continuous quality enhancement of teaching, learning and assessments. If the ultimate aim of quality assurance by the provider university and in-country quality audits is to achieve equivalence in the learning opportunities for TNE students, there is a need for a clear contractual provision for such a champion to be embedded in the host institution with clearly
defined responsibilities. A single provider cannot enforce this, so here lies a task ahead for the worldwide sector as a whole.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Antonia M. Lamers-Reeuwijk http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7940-8065
Wilfried F. Admiraal http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1627-3420
Roeland M. van der Rijst http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6749-8283

References

Biggs, J. (2012). What the student does: Teaching for enhanced learning. Higher Education Research & Development, 31(1), 39–55. doi:10.1080/07294360.2012.642839

Bovill, C., Jordan, L., & Watters, N. (2015). Transnational approaches to teaching and learning in higher education: Challenges and possible guiding principles. Teaching in Higher Education, 20(1), 12–23. doi:10.1080/13562517.2014.945162

British Council. (2016). The scale and scope of UK higher education transnational education. Retrieved from https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/…/scale-and-scope-of-uk-he-tne-report.pdf

Castle, R. G., & Kelly, D. J. (2004). International education: Quality assurance and standards in offshore teaching: Examplars and problems. Quality in Higher Education, 10(1), 51–57. doi:10.1080/1353832042000222751

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). Research methods in education (7th edition). London: Routledge.

Dimitrov, N., & Haque, A. (2016). Intercultural teaching competence: A multi-disciplinary model for instructor reflection. Intercultural Education, 27(5), 437–456. doi:10.1080/14675986.2016.1240502

Dobos, K. (2011). ‘Serving two masters’ – academics’ perspectives on working at an offshore campus in Malaysia. Educational Review, 63(1), 19–35. doi:10.1080/001319111003748035

Eaves, M. (2011). The relevance of learning styles for international pedagogy in higher education. Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 17(6), 677–691. doi:10.1080/13540602.2011.625143

Evans, S., & Morrison, B. (2011). Meeting the challenges of English-medium higher education: The first-year experience in Hong Kong. English for Specific Purposes, 30(2011), 198–208. doi:10.1016/j.esp.2011.01.001

Gibbs, G. (2013). Reflections on the changing nature of educational development. International Journal for Academic Development, 18(1), 4–14. doi:10.1080/1360144X.2013.751691

Gribble, K., & Ziguras, C. (2010). Learning to teach offshore: Pre-departure training for lecturers in transnational programs. Higher Education Research & Development, 22(2), 205–216. doi:10.1080/07294360.2010.501075

Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. Teachers and Teaching, 8(3), 381–391. doi:10.1080/135406002100000512

Hammer, S. J., & Green, W. (2011). Critical thinking in a first year management unit: The relationship between disciplinary learning, academic literacy and learning progression. Higher Education Research and Development, 30(3), 303–315. doi:10.1080/07294360.2010.501075

Hoare, L. (2013). Swimming in the deep end: Transnational teaching as culture learning? Higher Education Research & Development, 32(4), 561–574. doi:10.1080/07294360.2012.700918

Hughes, C., & Thomas, H. (2017). Collaborative provision quality assurance isn’t just red tape …. Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 21(1), 20–25. doi:10.1080/13603108.2016.1235623
Jordan, L., Bovill, C., Othman, S. M., Saleh, A. M., Shabila, N. P., & Watters, N. (2013). Is student-centred learning a Western concept? Lessons from an academic development programme to support student-centred learning in Iraq. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(1), 13–25. doi:10.1080/13562517.2013.827649

Keay, J., May, H., & O’Mahony, J. (2014). Improving learning and teaching in transnational education: Can communities of practice help? *Journal of Education for Teaching, 40*(3), 251–266. doi:10.1080/02607476.2014.903025

Keevers, L., Lefoe, G., Leask, B., Sultan, F. K. P. D., Ganesharatnam, S., Loh, V., & Lim, J. S. Y. (2014). 'I like the people I work with. Maybe i’ll get to meet them in person one day': Teaching and learning practice development with transnational teaching teams. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 40*(3), 232–250. doi:10.1080/02607476.2014.903024

Knight, J. (2016). Transnational education remodeled: Toward a common TNE framework and definitions. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 20*(1), 34–47. doi:10.1177/1028315315602927

Latchem, C., & Ryan, Y. (2013). Transnational distance education: Cultural and quality considerations. In J. Willems, B. Tynan, & R. James (Eds.), *Global challenges and perspectives in Blended and distance learning* (pp. 55–72). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.

Leask, B. (2005). AVCC Offshore Quality Project Report: A Professional Development Framework for Academic Staff Teaching Australian Programs Offshore. Retrieved from http://w3.unisa.edu.au/academicdevelopment/teaching/documents/offshore_framework.pdf

Lemke-Westcott, T., & Johnson, B. (2013). When culture and learning styles matter: A Canadian university with Middle-Eastern students. *Journal of Research in International Education, 12*(1), 66–84. doi:10.1177/1475240913480105

Locke, W., Whitchurch, C., Smith, H., & Mazenod, A. (2014). Shifting Landscapes: Meeting the staff development needs of the changing academic workforce. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/shifting-landscapes-meeting-staff-development-needs-changing-academic-workforce

McNamara, J., & Knight, J. (2016). Transnational education data collection systems: awareness, analysis and action. British Council & DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). Retrieved from https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/1.1_report_tne_data_collection_system.pdf

Murray, N. (2012). Ten ‘good practice Principles’… ten key questions: Considerations in addressing the English language needs of higher education students. *Higher Education Research & Development, 31*(2), 233–246. doi:10.1080/07294360.2011.555389

O’Mahony, J. (2014). *Enhancing student learning and teacher development in transnational education.* York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancing-student-learning-and-teacher-development-transnational-education

Oman Academic Accreditation Authority. (2008). Quality Audits reports. Retrieved from http://www.ooaa.gov.om/Institution.aspx#Inst_ReviewDwnld

Prowse, J., & Goddard, J. T. (2010). Teaching across cultures: Canada and Qatar. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 40*(1), 31–53.

Pyvis, D. (2011). The need for context-sensitive measures of educational quality in transnational higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education, 16*(6), 733–744. doi:10.1080/13562517.2011.570436

Quality Assurance Agency. (2011). UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Quan, R., Smailes, J., & Fraser, W. (2013). The transition experiences of direct entrants from overseas higher education partners into UK universities. *Teaching in Higher Education, 18*(4), 414–426. doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.752729

Robson, S. (2011). *Internationalisation: A Transformative Agenda for higher education? Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 17*(6), 619–630. doi:10.1080/13540602.2011.625116

Ryan, J. (2011). Teaching and learning for international students: Towards a transcultural approach. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 17*(6), 631–648. doi:10.1080/13540602.2011.625138
Samelowicz, K., & Bain, J. D. (2001). Revisiting academics' beliefs about teaching and learning. *Higher Education, 41*(3), 299–325. doi:10.1023/A:1004130031247

Sharp, K. (2017). The distinction between academic standards and quality: Implications for transnational higher education. *Quality in Higher Education, 23*(2), 138–152. doi:10.1080/13538322.2017.1356615

Smith, C. (2011). Examinations and the ESL student - more evidence of particular disadvantages. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(1), 13–25. doi:10.1080/02602930903173959

Smith, K. L. (2009). Transnational teaching experiences: An under-explored territory for transformative professional development. *International Journal for Academic Development, 14*(2), 111–122. doi:10.1080/13601440902969975

Smith, L. (2009). Sinking in the sand? Academic work in an offshore campus of an Australian university. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(5), 467–479. doi:10.1080/07294360903154118

Trigwell, K., & Prosser, M. (2004). Development and use of the approaches to teaching inventory. *Educational Psychology Review, 16*(4), 409–424. doi:10.1007/s10648-004-0007-9

Universities UK international. (2017). Gulf Mapping Report. Retrieved from [https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/Gulf20Mapping20Report%202017.pdf](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/Gulf20Mapping20Report%202017.pdf)

Wilkins, S., & Neri, S. (2018). Managing faculty in transnational higher education: Expatriate academics at international branch campuses. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 22*(5), 1–22.

Williams, J. (2016). Quality assurance and quality enhancement: Is there a relationship? *Quality in Higher Education, 22*(2), 97–102. doi:10.1080/13538322.2016.1227207

Ziguras, C. (2008a). The cultural politics of transnational education: Ideological and pedagogical issues for teaching staff. In L. Dunn, & M. Wallace (Eds.), *Teaching in transnational education: Enhancing learning for offshore international students* (pp. 44–54). London: Routledge.

Ziguras, C. (2008b). Cultural and contextual issues in the evaluation of transnational Distance Education. In T. Evans, M. Haughey, & D. Murphy (Eds.), *International Handbook of distance education* (pp. 639–653). Bingley: Emerald Bingley.