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Practices to improve collaboration by reconfiguring boundaries in transnational education

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Abstract

This paper investigates quality assurance as boundary-making practices that establish and re-establish boundaries of a transnational education (TNE) partnership between an Australian and a Malaysian higher education institution. Drawing on practice theory we offer a conception of boundaries as enacted, shifting and performed by the multiple actors involved in the partnership. We employ a relational, practice-based approach and a participatory action research methodology to investigate how quality assurance could be re-configured to enhance relationships and collaboration, and support on-going dialogue, co-developed curriculum and context–sensitive quality measures. This paper re-casts boundaries and borders as collective performances, offering an expanded conception of boundaries from the dualistic *home-host*, pre-given conceptions common in the TNE literature. Our case study demonstrates how participatory action learning (PAL) is useful for expanding and re-shaping the boundaries in TNE in ways that support the creation of transnational teaching teams and intercultural communities of practice. We show how stretching the boundaries from a dyadic relationship between quality assuror and subject coordinator to include sessional academics and enacting PAL projects using communal media generates the conditions of possibility for developing teaching teams that are transnational in practice as well as in name. The move towards joint responsibility for the development of curriculum, teaching and learning contributes to more equitable partnership approaches and creates possibilities for intercultural engagement between academics and students in different geographical and cultural contexts.

Keywords

Transnational education, borders, boundaries, practice-based, quality assurance

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has grown rapidly as a component of the internationalisation of higher education; this growth continues to change the boundaries of higher-education institutions. TNE, also known as offshore, cross-border higher education or borderless education, has been succinctly described as "the mobility of an education program or higher education institution providers between countries" (Knight 2016, p. 36). The approaches to TNE include "franchising and on-line education" (Dobos 2011 p. 20), establishing international branch campuses, joint/double/multiple-degree programs, combinations of fly-in and local staff (Knight 2016) and validation of foreign partners' curriculum and program (Healey 2015). However, the boundaries between these approaches are becoming blurred. Evidence suggests that the broadening globalisation of education and connectivity have resulted in TNE partnerships becoming increasingly sophisticated. New mechanisms for understanding TNE are necessary (Healey 2015).

The TNE literature demonstrates that teaching in this context is complex, multifaceted and challenging, involving diverse cultures, expectations and power and role inequalities (Waterval et al. 2015). To ensure accountability and minimise risk, institutions apply quality standards and audits to partner institutions, extending complexities and tensions (Leihy & Salazar 2017; Healey 2015; Kaktiņš 2018). Notably, collaborative relationships marked by ongoing dialogue, co-developed context-sensitive teaching and learning-quality measures, curriculum adaption and intercultural learning, have been identified as critical factors in enhancing TNE (Keay et al. 2014; Keevers et al. 2014a; Pyvis 2011; Smith 2010). TNE collaboration requires navigation of both boundaries and borders. Boundaries may be structural, professional, cultural and linguistic. Borders move well beyond geographical and national conceptualisations (Beerkens 2002). In the TNE literature, boundaries and borders have been largely cast as fixed entities that must be crossed, bridged or overcome to ensure quality curriculum and educational outcomes (Shams & Huisman 2016).

In contrast, Sutton et al. (2012, p. 148) propose that internationalisation may be characterised as "boundary-bending", focusing not on what one institution can achieve, but what many can achieve together. Similarly, Tadaki and Tremewan (2013, p. 370) argue for a rethinking of tertiary institutions' globalising processes not as "objective boundary conditions…[but] as deliberate constructions created and recreated in a range of sites and moments". Developing this line of inquiry, Leung and Waters (2017, p. 1279) conceptualise boundaries and borders in TNE as "multiple and dynamic, producing and being produced by the shifting power relationship among individuals and institutions involved, both directly and indirectly, in their formation and operation".

Employing notions of boundaries as multiple, flexible and constructed and drawing on practice theory, we propose that considering TNE boundaries as entanglements of shifting relations that are enacted and performed may offer generative alternatives for studying and enacting TNE itself. Such a conception allows us to challenge given boundaries, fixed distinctions and taken-for-granted assumptions. Our approach extends the analysis of borders and boundaries in TNE. Specifically, it illuminates ways of reconfiguring the boundaries of TNE relations to expand the possibilities of creating transnational teaching teams.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how boundary relations in TNE may be reconfigured using participatory action learning (PAL) to support and enhance relationships, improve the outcomes of collaboration and dialogue and enable the co-development of context-sensitive curricula and quality measures. Addressing these key challenges has the potential to improve learning and teaching in transnational programs. As part of a wider research project (Keevers et at. 2014b), this paper is grounded empirically in a study of a TNE partnership between a university in Australia and a private college in Malaysia. It builds on the TNE literature on boundaries and borders by focusing attention on boundary-making *practices*, boundary *relations* and boundary *work*. We investigate how boundaries within TNE arrangements are used by multiple groups with different roles, both as sources of distinction that create power inequalities and as sites of collaboration and collegiality. We show that the way boundaries are cut in the enactment of the quality-assurance (QA) approach has unintended effects. While some people, things and processes are made visible and present, others are rendered invisible and absent (e.g. students and academics employed as tutors on a sessional contract).

This paper is organised as follows. We begin by discussing literature focused on borders and boundaries in TNE, and describe how a practiced-based approach is useful in reconfiguring understandings of boundaries and boundary relations. Next, the empirical study is introduced and analysed. We highlight the boundaries enacted by the QA approach of the transnational partnership, some of its unintended effects and how the QA approach and boundary relations could be reconfigured using PAL to create a sense of belonging to a *transnational teaching team*. We conclude by discussing how insights generated from our fieldwork can inform and extend conceptions of borders and boundaries to focus attention on boundary relations and boundary-making practices in the context of increasingly *glocalised* higher-education systems.

Transnational education: borders and boundaries

In the literature, different terms used synonymously to describe TNE reflect the relevance and diverse conceptions of borders and boundaries (Kosmtzky & Putty 2016). For instance, borderless education denotes the disappearance of borders and boundaries in geography, time and discipline. However, the terms "offshore", "cross-border" and "transnational higher education" (p. 49) refer to the physical location of students and emphasise the presence of national borders.

Given the existence of diverse kinds of borders and boundaries in TNE, how may TNE partnerships be established, negotiated and maintained? Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argue that learning inherently challenges established boundaries through "social-cultural differences leading to discontinuity in action or interaction" (p.133) in a community of practice. They consider the concepts of boundary crossing and boundary objects to abridge points of relatedness where "sameness and difference…between…sites" (p. 133) co-occur, and where boundary-crossing activities by individuals or groups make interacting across sites possible. The creation and management of boundary objects, "which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (Star & Griesemer 1989 p. 393), are integral to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in TNE. These global collaborative endeavors are heavily embedded within a diverse set of digital devices and infrastructures, in which it is crucial to maintain "coherence across intersecting social worlds" (p. 393).

Most existing TNE research employs a *home-host* dualistic conception of boundaries (Waterval et al. 2015). Boundaries are understood as pre-existing entities, which may be crossed through the use of boundary objects. In TNE, boundaries are socially constructed phenomena, intersecting diverse organisations, communities or social worlds. Boundary objects, boundary infrastructure and boundary workers are sociomaterialities and actors who may be implicated in challenging boundaries and negotiating understandings between bounded camps (Akkerman & Bakker 2011). Bordogna (2017), considering how a "boundary spanner" (p. 4) may positively enhance social capital features such as "connectivity, resource transfer and collaboration" (p. 12), illuminates other kinds of boundaries in TNE. When boundaries are understood as relational processes, symbolic boundaries, used by social actors to "categorise objects, people, practices, and time and space" (p. 168), differ from social boundaries, which actualise "social differences manifested in unequal access…distribution of resources and social opportunities" (Lamont & Molnár 2002, p. 168). Taken together, symbolic and social boundaries may be implicated in the social inclusion or exclusion of those involved in TNE, in how successful boundary-spanners are in building social capital and in the establishment of intercultural communities of practice (Dunn & Wallace 2008). Relatedly, Amaral et al. (2016) assert that both symbolic and social boundaries are used by higher-education institutions to "maintain their identity" (p. 50) and separating one from another. Hence, they argue that cross-border higher education constitutes a challenge to both the boundaries and identity of higher-education institutions.

We concur with the literature that boundaries and borders are relevant to TNE. We maintain that boundaries are produced and reproduced through the enactment of cultural, linguistic, professional, organisational and technological practices. Further, we reposition what are discussed in the boundary literature as boundary objects and materialities of practice, and boundary spanners, which are discussed as as enactors of certain kinds of practices. Next, we develop a conceptual link between the boundaries and practice-based literatures. Our aim is to offer a relational, situated, dynamic and enacted conception of boundaries and borders.

A practice-based approach to boundaries and borders in higher-education institutions

Practice-based studies are prominent across the field of education, including higher education (e.g. Grootenboer et al. 2017; Keevers et al. 2014a; Boud et al. 2016). Schatzki (2010) argues that practices provide the basic structure of social life in social sites. Higher-education institutions are social sites comprising "practices and material arrangement bundles" (p. 72) that persist and frame practice possibilities. Practices may be dispersed in time and space and encompass interactions of doings and sayings amid people, things and sites. Thus, in TNE practitioners in different locations and times still share a practice together.

Practices, carried out by people in their day-to-day activities, are organised by shared understandings, rules and goals. Practices act on, and are acted upon, by various sociomaterialities including boundary objects. Those involved in TNE develop a shared repertoire that is used when engaging in practice to perform work (Bjørn & Østerlund 2014). Developing and calibrating a shared repertoire requires time and engagement through participation and negotiation. It is important, therefore, that a practice-based approach focuses attention on the quality of the relationships and the negotiations between those involved in the TNE partnership.

The open-endedness of practices is at the nexus of their capacity to make and remake boundaries. Through changes in practices, boundaries may be made, remade or undone. For example, if the enactment of a rule in one site is inappropriate or contradicts the existing rules of the other site, the rule may be enacted in different ways across sites, thus re-establishing site-specific boundaries. Similarly, tensions between goals and organisation of practices may work to expand or contract boundaries. For example, collegial activities (i.e. site visits; discussions) to localise content and create student and staff inclusivity may work to expand the boundaries of the program. Conversely, these activities may be construed as added costs and be only partially enacted, thus contracting the boundaries of the program. Practices in TNE programs have multiple, competing and changing goals, and involve multiple actors.

Understanding boundaries as relational draws attention to their dynamic character, as they are performed in practice and located in action. Accordingly, the boundaries that delineate things as separate and different are recast as a doing, a performance, not as pre-given, stable, fixed entities (Barad 2007). Boundaries simultaneously bind and bound, include and exclude. A relational, practice-based approach conceptualises boundaries and borders as manifold and in a constant state of *becoming with* (Haraway 2008). It focuses attention on boundary-*making*, shifts in boundary relations and the enactments of difference, which are always political (Suchman 2007). It offers an alternative conception of QA not as a fixed apparatus to ensure compliance, but as a boundary object enacted in practice.

Quality assurance in higher education and TNE has been variously positioned as a normative approach (O'Rourke & Bulushi 2010), codes of practice or control mechanisms. Two commonly used definitions of quality in this context – fitness for purpose and value for money – give primacy to the end-product of learning rather than on the processes that enable it (Cheng 2017). In line with Cheng (2017), we characterise quality as an ongoing project in higher education that focuses on the learning process as well as outcomes; as an engagement and commitment to continuously improving one's own practice (i.e. via peer reviews, collaboration and sharing of good practice), repositioning academics as enactors of quality systems for the evaluation and improvement of teaching and learning as a "virtue of professional practice" (Cheng 2017, p. 157). Accordingly, we discuss QA as a series of boundary-drawing practices within and as part of the TNE partnership, rather than as an apparatus for offshore control (Smith 2010). Such boundary-making practices involve processes over which stakeholders have a degree of control, and therefore a degree of responsibility for their creation. The result is an iterative reconfiguration of what is included and excluded from mattering, what becomes visible and what remains obscure. For this study, a practice-based approach suggests a focus on the local, situated complexity of TNE in practice, on boundary-making and whether boundary relations might be reconfigured to enhance collaboration of transnational teaching teams.

In summary, we maintain that practices are the basic structures of social life in the social site of higher-education institutions. The presumption here is that TNE is experienced only through ongoing practices. Deepening our understandings of how practices are central to the performance of TNE is required to harness the generative and productive potential of boundaries and borders to enhance collaboration within teaching teams. Unlike Akkerman and Bakker (2011), we assert that boundary objects are inseparable from practice, shaping and being shaped by boundary-making practices. They are inherent sociomaterialities of practices, which through multiple enactments help to nudge a practice in this or that way, helping to make, remake and undo boundaries. We extend existing literature that employs a *home-host* dualistic notion of boundaries. A practice-based approach opens new possibilities in TNE by expanding the scope of boundary work to include multiple groups and sociomaterialities.

Study sites and methodology

In this section, we situate our study, describe the research methodology and outline the specific methods used and the data collected and analysed. We make our analysis from the data collected at two sites: High Mountain University (HMU) in Australia and Soul Community College (SCC) in Malaysia. Pseudonyms are used for all research participants and associated higher-education institutions. The form of TNE used by HMU and SCC is a partnership using a QA approach.

Students at SCC attain HMU degrees. HMU provides the curriculum and QA and SCC the academic staff, campuses, marketing and other resources.

In this partnership two academics usually have primary responsibility for the delivery of a subject, one in each institution. The HMU subject coordinator is the academic responsible for the delivery of the Australian-based subject, and often also responsible for the QA at all locations. In this role, they are called the Quality Assurer. Academics in both locations contribute to the design of any modification to the transnational version of the subject. SCC academics do the teaching and assess student learning.

Practice-based participatory action research

A relational, practice-based approach using participatory action research (PAR) (Bradbury & Reason 2006) was employed to access data for this case study and actively involve teams from both sites in the research project. Underpinning our practice-based approach is the rejection of an ontology of separateness in favour of a relational ontology that suggests things are "not first self-contained entities and then interactive. Each thing, including each person, is first and always a nexus of relations" (Slife 2004, p. 159). One of the implications of this approach is that the primary unit for this research is not independent actors and objects with inherent boundaries and properties, but sociomaterial phenomena that are produced in practice. Rather than being a separate process of researching the collaborative efforts from the outside, PAR was embedded into our activities and processes in the form of the intercultural communities of practice (Dunn & Wallace 2008) unfolded.

Similar to most PAR approaches, our project involved a spiral of the four moments of PAR: planning, action, observing and reflecting (Bradbury & Reason 2006). A multi-site PAR was employed, as it offered a good fit to an enquiry process connected across multiple teaching teams and locations.

The case study that is the focus of this paper formed part of a larger research project.
The broader research team comprised 12 members from five higher-education institutions across three countries: four members from SCC and three from HMU. An external evaluator, a recognised expert in the field of TNE acted as a participant observer and "critical friend". The PAR cycles of the HMU/SCC transnational teaching (TT) teams formed a distinct case study and afforded multiple opportunities to explore different aspects of professional-practice development using participatory action learning (PAL) with a range of disciplines including communication and media studies, commerce and business and computer science and information systems.

Data-gathering methods and analysis

Within the PAR cycles, multiple interpretive methods were used to access a variety of data including:

- 50 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (including for example, Deputy Vice Chancellors (International), faculty deans, subject coordinators, tutors, heads of schools)
- 16 observations of teaching and learning practices across sites
- PAL projects with TT teams (39 teaching-team members from the faculties of Law, Humanities and Arts, Business and Engineering and Information Sciences)
- 11 reflexive discussions with TT teams
- document analysis (e.g. QA policies/procedures, partnership agreements, subject outlines, assessments, rubrics).

PAL projects: The researchers worked with the academics to create TT teams using cross-border, work-based, PAL projects facilitated by members of the research team. These PAL projects involved teaching teams consisting of subject coordinators and full-time and sessional academics from both sites investigating, engaging and learning together in their daily work context. Together they developed resources and pedagogies to support curriculum renewal, student learning and the extension of professional practice. During the PAR/PAL cycles participating TT teams identified their shared professional-practice development needs and iteratively designed, implemented and evaluated projects, resources and practices to meet those needs and support transnational learning. To enact the PAL/PAR processes we depended on distance-shrinking technologies such as regular videoconference meetings and workshops and shared cyber-spaces (e.g. Dropbox, Google Hangouts and Moodle).

Qualitative data from interviews, observations and reflexive group discussions were collated and analysed to identify dominant themes. The researchers initially coded the data using words from the texts, and then developed more “abstract” codes to arrive at themes (Hesse-Biber 2007). The identification of themes and analysis was corroborated with research participants across sites. QA practices was one of four dominant themes that emerged from the data analysis. Based on feedback from the research participants and sensitising concepts employed from the literature outlined earlier in this paper, further analysis was conducted with a particular focus on the exclusions and inclusions created through the HMU QA approach. The authors drafted a paper and distributed it to members of the research team for further development and comment.

Findings and discussion

QA approach and boundaries – the QA approach as boundary object

The documented QA approach is the central boundary infrastructure of the HMU/SCC partnership and shapes the teaching, learning, and assessment practices of all involved. The policies and procedures that make up the approach aim to achieve equivalence of experience of education delivered in HMU/SCC programs and to provide a systematic review of subjects offered by SCC. Analysis of the QA procedure shows that it establishes boundaries between sites and between people. For example, activities that enhance “*cooperation between staff members at the two institutions (either in person…or by videoconference or teleconference) on matters such as curriculum, syllabus, assessment tasks, and teaching methods*” (HMU QA Procedure) are encouraged.

Similarly, the resolution of any disagreements between the *Quality Assurer* (usually the HMU subject coordinator) and the offshore subject coordinator is encouraged through *collegial discussion* before being referred to the *Deans* from each institution. The DVC (International), leader of TNE programs at HMU, summarises the HMU QA approach:

> *When you’ve got somebody at the other end that’s got a lot of experience and has taught this subject before, clearly, you need a light touch…to QA…so, even though HMU control[s] the QA, we need to respect the caliber of the people at the other end…that’s what we refer to as* ***Tier 1****…and it is post the event…. I’ll describe the sequence…before a subject is started, we have to provide the academic at the other end with the latest version of the subject outline. There’s a discussion between the academic here and the academic there about any changes…that’s agreed upfront…. Once the subject is run…the academic staff here get a sample of high, medium and low of assignments, exam[s]….*

> *They write a report on the quality.... At the assessment committee meeting they look at the marks distribution…. If we find that there is an issue, we elevate that subject through to* ***Tier 2****…that's a much more inclusive, handholding kind of exercise…. There is direct engagement…more communication with the subject coordinator, the assignment set etc.*

The QA procedure supports "cooperation between staff members at the two institutions" (HMU Procedure). At the same time, in Tier 1 QA, the subject outline and proposed assessments "requires the approval of the relevant HMU academic faculty staff member"; once the subject has been delivered, the *Quality Assurer* reviews "samples of the major piece of assessment, uniformly distributed over the various grades; the final examination question paper and samples of scripts from the final examination and distribution of marks" (HMU Procedure). The focus here is approval and checking of outcomes rather than discussion and collaboration; as the DVC explains, Tier 1, the commonly used practice, is largely post-event. There are inherent tensions and contradictions between collaboration and control in the HMU QA approach – engagement and ongoing communication are only a requirement in Tier 2 QA when there are "persistent and unresolved issues" (HMU documentation).

In the QA approach described above, the subject outline is positioned as the key coordinating boundary object. Through negotiating and refiguring this artefact, academics from SCC sometimes have the opportunity to localise content and assessments to suit their context, adding a few degrees of freedom for both teachers and students.

Shumithira, an experienced teacher at SCC, reflected on her experience of negotiating subject outlines:

> *I think some Quality Assurers know that the subject outline has to be adapted to local situation and how much and how long it takes…. Some [Quality Assurers] do not know how far to localise and what is involved and what is going to happen, you know, they send it…."[I ask]…can we have it this way?"…[S]ome are agreeable and some are not…. I work around it, have to sort out…make do…. I think it needs more depth of communication, more understanding. It seems it is your luck, it's, like, hit and miss depending on who the Quality Assurer is.*

Although they are identified in the QA procedure, opportunities for collaboration in the localisation of content and assessments do not always happen in practice; rather, the inherent QA contradictions play out. Sometimes the practices associated with the subject outline are enacted in ways that expand boundaries, enabling local teachers to adapt elements of the subject content, while at other times these are enacted in ways that fortify boundaries, limiting opportunities for localisation. Because the subject outline, as a coordinating boundary object, is part of larger and smaller entanglements and thus boundary-making practices, shifting and sometimes-conflicting affordances and constraints may be associated with the same boundary object (Bjørn & Østerlund 2014).

QA approach and boundaries – enacting boundaries through QA

The QA approach pairs a subject coordinator at SCC with an academic that coordinates the subject at HMU. In this role they are together called the *Quality Assurers*. The use of the term *Quality Assurer* for the HMU subject coordinator reinforces the power inequalities between the partners. The recognition of and ambivalence towards the power relations embodied in the role of the *Quality Assurer* is evident in the following comments from a subject coordinator from HMU:

> *The QA establish[es] hierarchy, [but] I try not to work in a hierarchical way…. I prefer to work collaboratively but in the end, yes, I do need to sign off on Rami's [subject coordinator at SCC] work…to give it the HMU tick…. With the QA model in some ways I guess there's an element where I'm a bit of a supervisor…. I really don't think Rami needs supervision.*

The centrality of the relationship between the two subject coordinators to the QA approach is illustrated in the following comment from the DVC International at HMU:

> *…you can either make quality assurance a rich or a degrading experience, because it's the relationship between two academics [in] the processes that exist.*

Here the QA approach adopts a *home-host* dyadic conception of boundaries. The implications of the retrospective character of the Tier 1 QA approach combined with the reliance on a dyadic conception of boundaries is well illustrated in a comment by Mare (HMU subject coordinator/Quality Assurer):

> *The HMU/SCC model works very much on a quality-assurance model…me overseeing that the learning outcomes are the same, the marking levels are about the same…the paper work, the processes that I must go through are actually really focused… on HMU risk management, like protecting the brand…the standard…. So in terms of what I'm required to do, there's actually very little discussion of engaging students or creating, developing curriculum approaches together…. That sort of engagement is actually not required by the formal processes…but I'm most interested in two-way engagements and learning.*

Mare's desire for dialogue, co-development of curricula and engaging students across sites was a common sentiment expressed by the academics involved in the study. Several of the academics effectively advocated a reversal of the current Tier 1 and Tier 2 QA processes. The views of Tim, an HMU Subject Coordinator, are representative:

> *When I started teaching transnational role with SCC, I insisted to Ahmed [subject coordinator at SCC] that we would be cross-marking all the assessments in this first iteration of the subject…to make sure we're on the same page…. We had weekly Skype chats, which totally was not supposed to be part of the QA process.... If I were the one designing the QA process, this would be the most important part…not some final paperwork where we sign meaningless forms, but making sure that there is a weekly interaction…. It's really very important. Not to mention your establishing informal rapport with your colleague and you know…it goes a great way towards informative teaching and learning practice.*

In the QA approach, the objectives include the learning outcomes but exclude the means or process of partnership development until problems or breakdowns occur. Such outcomes-focused approaches to QA are endorsed by the Tertiary Education and Standards Quality Agency. While outcomes are clearly important, in the view of both Tim and Keay et al. (2014), how the partners engage and work together to achieve the outcomes is critical for effective teaching and learning. Tim's practices illustrate how the boundary enactments encouraged by an approach to QA focused almost solely on outcomes are "always accompanied by particular exclusions and always open to contestation" (Barad 2007, p. 153). Tim enables the emergence of new possibilities for transnational collaboration and curriculum design by questioning and reconfiguring the boundaries of his role as *Quality Assurer*. Accordingly, he enacts the QA procedure in a way that is congruent with how he understands teaching practice to be. Tim shifts the focus to interaction, calibration of assessment and relationship development.

Ahmed, the SCC subject coordinator working with Tim, describes how this collaborative approach to QA differs from approaches taken by other subject coordinators at HMU:

> *The major difference would be, there is usually less of a collaborative effort in the sense…that basically they leave you for the whole semester, and they moderate after the semester. With this subject it's more of a collaborative effort in teaching…because we get inputs all the time throughout the semester from my counterpart from HMU.… I would say there is contact and communication between me and the Quality Assurer [Tim] on a weekly basis.*

Tim and Ahmed cut the boundaries of the formal QA approach in ways that emphasise collaboration and ongoing communication. They reconfigure boundaries to shift attention onto teaching and learning as it unfolds in practice, rather than bounding their interaction to post-hoc moderation and assurance of quality.

QA approach and boundaries – reconfiguring boundary relations for inclusion

The boundary relations on which the QA approach is based emphasise the role of the two subject coordinators and exclude other teaching-team members from both institutions. This material exclusion restrains the possibility of developing a sense of belonging to a TT team. In our fieldwork many of the tutors from HMU commented that they were unaware that the subject they were teaching was also being taught at SCC. In this way the current QA apparatus renders the academic staff and the students from SCC invisible and immaterial to most of the HMU teaching academics and their students. For example, Michel, a sessional academic participating in a TT team working on a PAL project, commented during a reflexive group discussion:

> *Until my involvement with this project I had no idea Ahmed even existed, that he was coordinating the subject on an equal par with Felicity [subject coordinator at HMU].… I had no idea that the subject was running somewhere else…that our students could interact and learn with the students in Malaysia…. Working on that international level it's been…exciting and interesting*.

Michel's experience shows that expanding boundary relations to include the sessional academics teaching in the subjects offered transnationally using PAL has real social and material consequences for their work, and opens possible new engagements for their students.

Vijay, a subject coordinator from SCC who participated in a PAL project in which members of the TT team worked on assessment moderation and calibration, commented:

> *It is so useful to get to know people…great to have the whole team brought in, communicating…sharing experiences, understanding better the standards…expectations…listening to one another first hand…. I think it helps us empathise with the challenges the other people are going through. The huge impact for me was working together on the marking guide…communicating made it so much easier for me to perform my role.*

Expanding and blurring the boundaries to include all members of the teaching team across sites offered the possibility of belonging to a TT team and created new opportunities for engagement and intercultural learning in the context of the daily work of teaching and assessing. This sense of belonging was hard won for Vijay's teaching team. In our observations we witnessed divergent views amongst the team members from SCC and HMU in relation to the grading of assessments.

Calibrating the grading of assessments across the TT team members required robust discussions around the videoconference table. The impacts of these interactions resulted in personal reflection and professional learning. For example, John, a sessional academic at HMU, described how working with this TT team affected him:

> *I found the videoconferences extremely useful…. What I found particularly interesting was difference, differences of perspectives.... I had to go back and think of my own perspectives…review them…modify them…. I changed my views, my perspective working with the whole group, working with all our differences.*

Reconfiguring the boundary relations of QA to encompass the presence of multiple voices is challenging. As John's experience attests, it involves encountering difference and entering into intercultural communities of practice with which one is unfamiliar. Such a situation demands a willingness to be not-knowing and open to change. Accountability and responsibility in this form of *face-to-face* assessment moderation and calibration is achieved through ongoing negotiation, dialogue and reflexive engagement. This process is very different from the previous process-based on control or arbitration at a post-hoc assessment committee meeting chaired by one university partner. The boundary relations on which the new approach was based emphasised dialogue, negotiated practice and established a platform for the understanding of cultural differences. The impact on quality was long-term, rather than short-term. As the subject coordinator from HMU commented 12 months later, the calibration achieved amongst members of the TT team was sustained well beyond that single iteration of the subject. Consequently, it was no longer a routine practice to adjust the grades of the students from SCC during the post-hoc QA procedure.

QA approach and boundaries – unintended effects

One of the unintended consequences of the boundary relations enacted under the QA approach is that blind spots were created with regard to students. HMU academics have little or no interactions with the students at SCC. The SCC academics *do not* have access or interaction with the students at HMU. The boundary cuts enacted thus render students absent in the partner institutions. This absence is clear as Dave, the Dean of HMU programs at SCC,describes his work to dissolve boundaries. As the HMU staff member embedded in the partner environment, he is the key boundary worker in this transnational partnership.

> *[Staff at HMU] would say, "your students"…. I would say, "No, they're not mine, they're yours, you have to own them, not me."…They would reply "Yes, but they're in Malaysia."…It doesn't matter where they are…you have to break that down so there's no boundary…. So one of the big issues with [TNE] is that everybody has to own the whole enterprise, not just their little bit…that they're responsible for global students, not only HMU students.*

Brandon, a subject coordinator from HMU, links the invisibility of students from SCC to the communication practices and tools used between subject coordinators across sites.

> *I've never spoken to my counterpart in SCC…never on the phone…. We've communicated by e-mail…but it doesn't give you a sense as to what the individual is like…so I think the university needs to make it easier for both entities to interact with one another.... You have to find a way to eliminate that distance, and I believe that technology is the solution here…Skype...videoconferencing...because it's not treated on par…it's not given the presence…. What happens [is], we don't think of them as our students.*

Most of the academics in this study echoed Brandon's dissatisfaction with the reliance on email as the tool for communication. Communicating solely through email contributes to the enactment of boundaries that restrain opportunities for transnational academics, especially those at SCC and sessional academics at HMU, to engage in dialogue and contribute to the development of learning, teaching and assessment practices. Such communication practices are unlikely to engender a sense of belonging and connectedness amongst transnational partners.

The experiences of the TT teams involved in this study suggest that different boundary-making practices are enacted when they work with different tools. For example, when members of the teaching team were collaborating via email they worked very differently to when they were using communal media such as videoconferencing. In our observations we noted that once TT team members met via videoconference to work together on their PAL projects, their attention would invariably turn to extending and building opportunities for their students to interact, share perspectives and learn together. To this end some teams used scholarly blogs and Twitter to great effect; another team used an online simulation; and others uploaded group presentations to YouTube in combination with online discussions to provide peer and self-feedback and assessment.

Videoconferencing, Adobe Connect and Prezi were used effectively to facilitate intercultural work-based projects. All of these practices contributed to redefining boundaries and, according to the research participants, enhanced student learning. However, it is not the material form of the tool itself that creates or redefines the boundaries; rather, the tool allows the inclusion and exclusion of various sociomaterial practices at particular times (Bjørn & Østerlund 2014). Different tools enable and deny possibilities for communication, learning and teaching in the TNE environment depending on how they are used. For example, the subject coordinators from HMU and SCC are keen to integrate all the students into the same instance of the Moodle platform to ensure equality of participation for the students, and to encourage intercultural learning. Although there is no technological obstacle to a shared online space, the multiple professional groups involved in TNE with different roles make it difficult for the TT teams to dissolve these online borders. Phillip comments:

> *It's unfair because there is no technological reason why SCC students should not be able to access the same Moodle site but they cannot.... This is a failure of human imagination.*

In our fieldwork we observed repeated attempts by the subject coordinators at HMU to persuade professional staff responsible for the online platform to allow students from SCC to be included. Eventually, when SCC students were granted access, they were only granted view-only access. Hence the SCC students could not participate as equals with their fellow students located at HMU. This illustrates that the way multiple actors use a tool and a technological practice can have a profound effect on the boundaries within TNE arrangements. In this instance the implications of these boundary enactments were that students across sites were invisible and unintelligible to one another. This material exclusion of one group of students is consequential for the kinds of teaching and learning that is possible and generative for the kinds of teachers and students that are produced. Accordingly, the potential benefits of intercultural engagement and learning afforded from being enrolled in degree taught in multiple locations simultaneously are under-realised.

The research above illustrates how boundaries are experienced, negotiated and fortified in the TNE field of practices. They are dynamic and open to change as practices emerge. They are made up of a range of possible distinctions that can create either power inequalities or sites of co-participation, depending on the distinctions enacted. Accordingly, going beyond a dual *home-host* conception in understanding boundary work in TNE is important given the need for multiple workgroups to collaborate despite discontinuities in geography, time and culture. An approach that focuses on boundary-making practices as temporal and open to change recognises the tensions and divergent priorities amongst these multidisciplinary workgroups and the multiplicity of boundaries and borders involved in TNE.

Conclusion

This research makes a contribution by investigating how boundary-making practices that establish and re-establish institutional, hierarchical and professional boundaries may enhance or constrain the collaboration of TT teams. Our research focused attention on boundary objects, boundary relations and boundary work by focusing on the boundary infrastructure of QA. Boundary work emphasises the making of particular communities. In the fieldwork we undertook, multiple workgroups involved in TNE constructed the boundaries between what was inside and what was outside, what was included and excluded from mattering. The construction of boundaries was done for different reasons at different times, and the TNE practitioners involved applied different bundles of artefacts, doings, discourses and relations in boundary-making practices. The resulting configuration of boundary relations had consequences for the diverse workgroups involved in the TNE program in relation to jurisdictions, status, power, participation and visibility. For example, the combination of the post-hoc character of the Tier 1 QA procedure, the emphasis on dualistic Quality Assurer-subject coordinator interactions and the reliance on email as the communication technology had the unintended effect of excluding most tutors from participating in transnational teaching and rendering students from different sites invisible and disconnected from each other.

The paper makes a second contribution by recasting boundaries and borders in TNE as collective performances, enacted by multiple academic and professional staff. The paper offers an alternative, expanded conception of boundaries from the dualistic *home-host*, pre-given and somewhat fixed conceptions common in the TNE literature. Because boundaries and borders are not naturally given but configured and reconfigured in particular historical ways and with specific social and material consequences (Barad 2007), the accountability and responsibility of all involved in TNE is expanded. Accountability and responsibility, in this view, are not simply a matter of assuring the quality of programs using predetermined protocols and processes. Rather, it involves understanding the effects of practice arrangements and assessing their impacts on the quality of the TNE relationship and student learning. The paper supports the view that accountability and quality assurance “is met neither through control nor abdication but in ongoing practical, critical, reflexive and generative acts of engagement” (Suchman 2007, p. 286). Accordingly, QA is reoriented to focus attention on the quality of the relationships and negotiations between the various practitioners (academics, professional staff and students from both sites) involved in the TNE partnership.

We do not claim that our depictions of QA and boundary-making practices are generalisable to other TNE enterprises. A limitation of this study is that it focused on a case study of a single TNE partnership and generated conclusions that were contextually situated. However, there are implications from this study for future TNE studies interested in exploring how boundary infrastructures such as QA could be configured to support ongoing dialogue, co-developed curriculum and context-sensitive quality measures.

The paper makes a third contribution by demonstrating how PAL is useful for expanding and reshaping boundaries in TNE in ways that support the creation of TT teams and intercultural communities of practice. Specifically, the study shows how enacting PAL projects using communal media such as videoconferencing stretched the boundaries from a dyadic relationship between quality assurer and subject coordinator to include sessional academics, and created the conditions of possibility for developing a sense of belonging to a TT team. The PAL framework enabled these TT teams to engage in collaboration and dialogue to co-develop context-sensitive curriculum and quality measures. This move towards joint responsibility for the development of curriculum and delivery of programs contributes to more equitable partnership approaches, a move that Leung and Waters (2017) assert is an imperative transformation in the dynamic field of TNE.

Enacting QA practices to support trust and relationships between all members of the team provides a range of hitherto unrealised possibilities, such as intercultural engagement between students studying in different geographical and cultural contexts. The study found that redefining the boundaries between lecturers and sessional academics teaching at different sites using PAL processes had multiple short-term and long-term benefits. We conclude that the boundaries of QA need to be reconfigured to prioritise engagement, dialogue and connections to facilitate the development of teaching teams that are transnational in practice as well as in name.

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