Australian higher education third party arrangements: an independent institute case study

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Abstract

The marked increase in transnational higher education third party arrangements in recent years represents globalizing forms of education. Third party arrangements involve a partner institution being approved to deliver the primary institution's government-accredited courses. The primary institute is accountable for monitoring and documenting quality assurance and the third party is responsible to the primary institute for meeting the required higher education standards. This arrangement is particularly attractive for students who want to undertake an accredited degree from overseas, while retaining close relational, industry and cultural links in the home country. There has been some recent examination of higher education third parties focused on equity, transcultural pedagogy, and quality assurance. However, little research has been done regarding the Australian context. Alphacrucis College is one of the largest non-university, faith-based independent higher education institutes in Australia with three onshore third party arrangements in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as two offshore in Finland and the Philippines. Based on a case study including participant observation and a staff survey, this research argues that the success of faith-based third parties is largely a result of shared values and collaborative relationships. These are outworked in professional development and mentoring in learning and teaching, joint research and scholarship projects, equity of student experience through resourcing, and effective governance and quality assurance built on trust. While other higher education institutes may not have faith-based approaches, these findings can serve to produce successful onshore and offshore third parties in a broad range of contexts.

Keywords Higher Education · Third Party · Australia · Finland · Philippines

Introduction

The marked increase in transnational higher education third party arrangements in recent years represents globalizing forms of education. The Australian government's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2019, p. 1) defines a higher education third

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party arrangement as “an arrangement made by a registered provider with another party (in Australia or overseas) to deliver some or all of a higher education course that leads to the award of an Australian regulated qualification.” This can include work-integrated learning, study abroad programs, twinning, cross credit, or full delivery of a degree (Madafiglio et al., 2016). The primary institute is accountable for monitoring and documenting quality assurance and the third party is responsible to the primary institute for meeting the required higher education standards (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). Delivery of a course in Australia is ‘onshore’ and delivery outside of Australia is ‘offshore’ (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2019a).

Recent third party arrangement research focuses on equity, pedagogy, and quality (Choudaha, 2017; Prisacariu & Sha, 2016). However, little research has been done regarding the Australian context. Alphacrucis College is one of the largest non-university, faith-based independent higher education institutes in Australia with three onshore and two offshore third party arrangements. Based on participant observation and a staff survey, this case study reveals that the success of faith-based third party arrangements is largely a product of shared values and collaborative relationships. These are outworked in professional development and mentoring in learning and teaching, joint research and scholarship projects, equity of student experience through resourcing, and effective governance and quality assurance structures built on trust. While other public and independent higher education institutes may not have faith-based approaches, these findings can serve to produce successful onshore and offshore third party arrangements in a broad range of contexts.

Literature review

The International Education Association of Australia recommends a rigorous third party selection process, including historical connection, established communication processes, transparent finances, and adequate resourcing (Siemensma et al., 2015). Research identifies three ongoing tensions in third party arrangements: workload; culture; and quality assurance. Staff at the primary institution can feel resentful and burdened by third party responsibilities, in addition to their main roles. The ‘massification’ of higher education as a globalized enterprise tends to be driven by corporate rather than academic objectives which puts pressure on stretched resources (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2015; Madikizela-Madiya, 2018). *Faculty already find it difficult to maintain currency in scholarship* (Zuidema et al., 2019). This is particularly true in Christian higher education in Australia which has no access to government funding for research. Winning over stakeholders through inter-institutional relationship-building, prior to commencement of the third party arrangement, can reduce resistance and help build ownership (Beecher & Streitwieser, 2019).

Third party arrangements promote intercultural understanding, but different institutional cultures can cause tension, particularly offshore and in languages other than English (Lang et al., 2016). Third parties insist on autonomy, while primary institute staff must ensure that integrity of accredited courses is maintained (Bentley et al., 2017). “Bounded rationality” can flow from lack of third party staff involvement in policy development (Edwards et al., 2010, p. 308). However, fostering joint decision-making can dispel concerns (Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017). Christian ‘community’ is beneficial in finding common ground and establishing cultural affinity (Choi, 2015; Hoogstra, 2012). Dockery (2016, p. 118) argues for “a fresh spirit of cooperation” among Christian institutions to build bridges and share resources.

This derives from a focus on the spiritual development and vocational calling of staff and students (Schreiner, 2018).

Another common area of discord is around quality assurance, so trust-building is vital (Dzimińska et al., 2018; Stensaker, 2015). Mahsood Sha and Choon Boey Lim (2021) find that Australian university faculty have a largely pessimistic view of third party quality measures in academic standards, governance, leadership, and learning and teaching. There is even more suspicion regarding the quality of independent higher education institutes that lack the resources available to universities (Shah et al., 2019). In a climate where rankings have become all important, due diligence in monitoring performance is critical (Hains-Wesson, 2017; Wekullo, 2017). The instincts of faith-based institutions are toward collaboration and community building (Norsworthy et al., 2018; Allen & Badley, 2014). However, the Christian imperative to show love of neighbor does not trump the need for academic rigor (Stephens, 2021). While literature explores some issues in third party arrangements, little research has focused on faith-based institutes.

It is widely acknowledged that both the university and independent higher education sectors face challenges in achieving successful third party arrangements, including staff buy-in, intercultural differences in learning and teaching, and quality assurance pressures. However, Pentecostal institutes have added layers of complexity. Viewed as a subset of evangelicalism, Pentecostals have historically esteemed experiential spirituality above intellectual education (Hittenberger, 2004). The focus is on personal and spiritual transformation of students rather than turning a profit (Mann, 2021). Denominational colleges are especially constrained within the theological parameters of constituencies (Dirksen, 2020). Forming partnerships face the added risk of mission drift if institutional visions do not align (Jun & Collins, 2019). The following case study reveals how one Pentecostal higher education institution manages the balance between ensuring academic rigor while retaining the trust of its third parties and its own denominational stakeholders.

Case study presentation

There are currently 184 higher education institutes in Australia, including 37 public universities and five independent universities, which constitute over 90 per cent of the 1.5 million student population. Most providers in the sector are independent higher education institutes, but account for less than 10 per cent of total student population (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2019b). There are 16 faith-based independent higher education institutes in Australia, including three universities and one university of specialization. Alphacrucis College was established, in 1948, as the national training college of Australian Christian Churches (formerly Assemblies of God in Australia), one of the oldest Pentecostal denominations. While Pentecostals only represent around one per cent of the Australian population, it is the fastest growing Christian movement and features most of the nation's megachurches (Hutchinson et al., 2020). Alphacrucis College is a dual sector institute which delivers awards from certificate to doctorate level and has seven campuses across Australia and New Zealand. In 2016, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency awarded the college the same self-accrediting authority status as universities. Courses are offered in business and management, music, social sciences, society and culture, and teacher education. Of the 4000 enrolled students, there are around 800 third party students.

Four of Alphacrucis College's third parties have a shared Assemblies of God heritage. Hillsong College has two campuses in Sydney. It is operated by Hillsong Church which originated in Australian Christian Churches and has campuses in around 30 countries. Planetshakers College in Melbourne is owned by Planetshakers Church which is part of Australian Christian Churches and has 11 campuses across the world. Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in Baguio, Philippines is jointly owned and operated by the Assemblies of God General Councils of the Asia Pacific Region and the Assemblies of God World Missions (United States of America). Iso Kirja College has campuses in Helsinki and Keuruu, delivering in Finnish language. It is the only theological college serving the Finnish Pentecostal movement. While National Institute for Christian Education in Sydney is Alphacrucis College's only third party without an Assemblies of God history, it still shares a common Christian worldview. The significance of this case study lies in understanding how such close connections can impact third party operations. Such values-alignment and relationship-building can be of benefit to all third party arrangements, regardless of whether they are faith-based or not.

Method

As senior managers within Alphacrucis College and Hillsong College, this mixed method case study utilizes an 'insider' perspective with unique access to the data of one Christian institute in Australia (Pearson et al., 2015). While this results in an unavoidable degree of subjectivity, it also affords the opportunity to critically analyze from the inside-out. Robert Warwick and Douglas Board (2012, p. 148) define this as an embedded "flow of experience that is temporal and social" in which the researchers are immersed. Thus, our "social situatedness" provides the ideal position to investigate and implement changes in practice (Costley et al., 2010). The benefit of using real-life is a more rounded perspective of participants (Tardi, 2019). The case study method allows us to identify the keys to successful third party arrangements within Christian independent higher education institutes which can serve to inform other third party relationships in the broader sector.

An important component involved a survey of academic and administration staff across Alphacrucis College and its third parties, designed by the researchers, to understand staff perceptions of a successful third party arrangement. The questions (see [Appendix](#)) were developed by analyzing literature and continual reflective analysis of the third party processes and practices. The survey covers core activities in the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015): learning and teaching; research and scholarship; student support and services; and governance and quality assurance. Within each theme, respondents were asked about their experiences and were offered an opportunity to identify how the primary institute can best support third parties. In some cases, respondents were provided with a series of possible answers in a multiple-choice format, along with an option to specify an alternative answer. The survey data was analyzed using SPSS 27. Cross tabulations were done to examine the difference in responses to the various questions between faculty and non-faculty, administrative staff and non-administrative staff, and primary institute and third party personnel. A subset of questions related to the focus of this paper are addressed herein.

Survey participants

A copy of the survey, along with an explanation of its purpose was distributed to potential participants to complete online. The population ($n=338$) included staff involved in the implementation and administration of the third party arrangement from both the primary institute, Alphacrucis College ($n=279$), and its third parties ($n=59$). Overall, 101 Alphacrucis College and third party staff responded to the survey (30 per cent). While a relatively small sample, it is comparable with other studies (Gowan & Miner, 2021). As the survey was anonymous, not all responses could be assigned to relevant groups. However, most were able to be identified. The majority were from the primary institute ($n=66$), with about half that from the third parties (33). More faculty members ($n=54$) responded to the survey than administrators ($n=35$), or respondents who hold both faculty and administrative roles ($n=10$). This is consistent with the staffing profiles of all institutions. A high proportion (81 per cent) of respondents have less than five years' experience with third party arrangements (Fig. 1).

Survey results

In many cases, no notable variants were found between the responses of the various groups. Significant differences are reported below as are any other remarkable features of the data. The import of the frequent lack of difference will be examined in the discussion section. There is a relatively high proportion of non-responses (10–25 per cent), even in binary, 'yes/no' questions and some demographic questions. The data does not allow interrogation of the reason for this, but it may be because some primary institute respondents do not have close involvement in the third party arrangements. The two most common reasons given by respondents for the third party (*Question 6 The primary reason for a third party arrangement is ...*) were provision of education within a unique cultural, denominational, or social context (55 per cent), and provision of education closer aligned with professional practice or the working environment (18 per cent).

Fig. 1 Sample Characteristics

Learning and teaching

A significant difference arose in the responses to *Question 7 The most pressing challenge for learning and teaching at a third party is....* The top responses for third party staff were contextualizing primary institute courses (48 per cent) and being given opportunity to input into course and subject design (34 per cent). By contrast, the primary institute respondents highlighted finding suitably qualified faculty (18.5 per cent) and ensuring parity of assessment workloads between the institutions (24 per cent). These primary institute concerns were shared by the third party respondents, with 19 per cent highlighting contextualization and 13 per cent input into course and subject design (Table 1).

How the primary institute might support third party faculty in learning and teaching displayed a high number of non-responses (16 per cent). A significant difference was found between faculty and non-faculty here. The two top responses for faculty were delivering professional development regarding higher education pedagogy (42 per cent) and one-on-one mentoring opportunities (21 per cent). Non faculty also chose delivering professional development (50 per cent), but the second most frequent response for that group was no response ($n=10$). These three represent the three most common responses overall (professional development, $n=37$, and mentoring, $n=15$, with 16 respondents choosing not to answer (Table 2).

Research and scholarship

Most respondents (58 per cent) indicated they had a clear understanding of the difference between research and scholarship. No significant differences were found between any of the sub-groups. A large majority of respondents (82 per cent) spent less than five hours a week on research in answer to *Question 10 How many hours per week do you spend on writing research publications?* This increased to over 90 per cent when including those who spent 5–10 h a week (Table 3). Only one administrator spent more than five hours on this task, whereas one third of non-administrators spent more than five hours ($\chi^2(4, n=81)=12.28, p=0.015$).

Table 1 The most pressing challenge for learning and teaching at third parties

Response	Third party	Primary	All Groups
Contextualising primary institute courses to third party	14 (48 per cent)	10 (19 per cent)	24 (29 per cent)
Being given opportunity to input into course and subject design	10 (34 per cent)	7 (13 per cent)	17 (20 per cent)
Finding suitably qualified faculty	2 (7 per cent)	13 (24 per cent)	15 (18 per cent)
Ensuring equity of assessment workloads with primary institute	0	13 (24 per cent)	13 (16 per cent)
Other (please specify)	3 (10 per cent)	11 (20 per cent)	14 (17 per cent)
Total responses	29	54	83

$$\chi^2(5, n=99)=21.48, p=0.001$$

Table 2 The primary institute could best support third party faculty in learning and teaching by

Response	Not faculty	Faculty	All Groups
Delivering professional development regarding higher education pedagogy	13 (50 per cent)	24 (42 per cent)	37 (45 per cent)
One-on-one mentoring opportunities	3 (12 per cent)	12 (21 per cent)	15 (18 per cent)
Providing peer review teaching opportunities	5 (19 per cent)	8 (14 per cent)	13 (16 per cent)
Delivering professional development regarding online delivery	4 (15 per cent)	3 (5 per cent)	7 (8 per cent)
Other (please specify)	1 (4 per cent)	10 (18 per cent)	11 (13 per cent)
Total responses	26	57	83

$$\chi^2 (5, n=99) = 11.35, p < 0.05$$

Nearly half of respondents spend less than five hours each week maintaining currency in their discipline, as seen in the results from *Question 11 How many hours per week do you spend maintaining currency in your academic discipline?* Over three-quarters spend up to 10 h doing so (Table 4). As in *Question 10 How many hours per week do you spend on writing research publications?* nearly 16 per cent of participants did not answer this question. As expected, there was a significant difference between faculty and non-faculty responses. A much higher proportion of non-faculty (74 per cent) spent less than five hours, compared to 37 per cent of faculty. A significant difference was also found between administration and non-administrative personnel. Administrative staff spend fewer hours on maintaining currency, with 71 per cent spending less than five hours. Whereas only 30 per cent of non-administrative staff spent this little time, 37 per cent spending 5–10 h and a further 19 per cent 10–15 h.

The two most frequently cited reasons for faculty to publish their work in *Question 12 The primary reason faculty members should publish their work is to ...* were to create new knowledge in a discipline and to share knowledge with the broader community. Nearly two-thirds of respondents chose either or both. Faculty responses were significantly different from non-faculty. Faculty reported these two responses in nearly equal numbers (32 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively), whereas non-faculty put much more weight on creating new knowledge (46 per cent) than their next most frequent response, increasing academic rigor and reputation of the institution (25 per cent; Table 5). The responses between the other groups did not differ significantly, broadly matching the overall results. It is important to note that the number of total responses sometimes do not cross add due to the number of valid cases being fewer when performing the χ^2 analysis.

Table 3 Hours per week spent on research

Number of hours	Frequency	Per cent
<5	70	82.4
5–10	7	8.2
10–15	6	7.1
15–25	1	1.2
> 25	1	1.2
Total	85	100.0

Table 4 Hours per week spent maintaining currency in discipline

Number of hours	Faculty	Non-Faculty	Administrators	Non-Adminis- trators	All Groups
<5	21 (37 per cent)	20 (74 per cent)	27 (71 per cent)	13 (30 per cent)	41 (48 per cent)
5–10	20 (35 per cent)	4 (15 per cent)	6 (16 per cent)	16 (37 per cent)	25 (29 per cent)
10–15	8 (14 per cent)	3 (11 per cent)	3 (8 per cent)	8 (19 per cent)	11 (13 per cent)
15–25	5 (9 per cent)	0	0	5 (12 per cent)	5 (6 per cent)
> 25	3 (5 per cent)	0	2 (5 per cent)	1 (2 per cent)	3 (4 per cent)
Total	57	27	38	43	85
	$\chi^2 (4, n=84)=11.75, p=.02$		$\chi^2 (4, n=81)=16.81, p=.002$		

Student support and services

There was a high level of non-response to *Question 13 The most important aspect of student support and services is ...* Most respondents (80 per cent) indicated that the primary goal is to ensure students are equipped with necessary skills and resources to compete their studies. Remaining choices were selected by ten or fewer respondents in each case (Table 6). No significant differences were found between members of the various groups. The high non-answer rate suggests a degree of uncertainty.

Question 14 The most pressing challenge facing student support and services at a third party are ... also displayed a high non-response rate (21 per cent of participants). However, one or both of two responses were chosen by 78 per cent of respondents. Ensuring equity of student experience between the primary institute and the third parties and providing a similar level of support and service between the two parties were identified as the two most pressing challenges for student support services (Table 7). Faculty and non-faculty differed in their responses, as did responses from third party and primary institute staff. The difference was one of emphasis between faculty and non-faculty. Faculty emphasized equity of experience, while non-faculty focused on provision of the same level of support. Primary institutes emphasized the two aspects already mentioned, third party respondents also included training students in the importance of academic integrity. This response and the previous two received similar levels of support.

Table 5 The primary reason faculty members should publish their work is

Response	Not faculty	Faculty	All Groups
Create new knowledge in an academic discipline	13 (46 per cent)	18 (32 per cent)	31 (36 per cent)
Share knowledge with the broader community	4 (14 per cent)	19 (34 per cent)	23 (27 per cent)
Increase academic rigour and reputation of the institution	7 (25 per cent)	8 (14 per cent)	16 (19 per cent)
Improve learning and teaching skills	4 (14 per cent)	3 (5 per cent)	7 (8 per cent)
Other (please specify)	0	8 (14 per cent)	8 (9 per cent)
Total responses	28	56	85

$$\chi^2 (5, n=99)=12.43, p=.029$$

Table 6 The most important aspect of student support and services at third parties

	Frequency	Per cent
Ensuring students are equipped with the skills and resources required to complete the course	65	80
Fostering a safe, fun and engaging student community	10	12
Ensuring that the students imbibe the cultural and/or spiritual ethos of the institution	3	4
Other (please specify)	3	4
Total	81	100.0

Governance and quality assurance

Regarding governance and quality assurance, most responses to *Question 15 The most important aspect of carrying out governance or management of a third party is ...* indicated that clear and consistent communication of expectations and requirements was the most important aspect, with 70 per cent of respondents selecting this option. This question also had a high non-response rate of 21 per cent. The next most common response indicated the importance of having designated personnel to oversee compliance with primary institute procedures (18 per cent) (Table 8).

There was no significant difference in response between any of the sub-groups examined. The highest non-response rate of 25 per cent was to *Question 16 Are you aware of the policies and expectations of the primary institute regarding your third party arrangement?* Perhaps the nature of the question biased it against primary institute respondents, with the question appearing to be asked of third party personnel. The valid response rates were fairly evenly split, with 57 per cent indicating they were aware of the primary institute's third party arrangement policies and procedures. The only significant difference in responses was between third party and primary institute personnel. Unsurprisingly, 82 per cent of third party respondents said they were aware, whereas only 40 per cent of primary institute respondents were aware ($\chi^2 (1, n=74)=13.03, p<0.001$). *Question 17 The greatest challenge in maintaining academic integrity is ...* also received a high non-response rate (23 per cent). Even with that, 55 per cent of participants identified as challenges the lack of student understanding regarding academic misconduct and the lack of staff resources for monitoring and identifying academic integrity. None of the sub-groups reported significant differences. The following discussion will examine the survey results to highlight keys to successful third party arrangements.

Main results analysis and discussion

The survey covers the core activities of learning and teaching, research and scholarship, student support and services, and governance and quality assurance. The frequent agreement and low levels of difference in the results across Alphacrucis College and third party responses suggests like-minded priorities, particularly the focus on Christian cultural context and professional practice. Alphacrucis College undertakes extensive consultation with potential third parties, prior to signing a memorandum of understanding, to ensure an alignment of values and to provide assurance that institutional culture will be retained. Given that over 80 per cent of staff surveyed have less than five years'

Table 7 The most pressing challenge for student support and services at third parties

	Faculty	Non-faculty	Primary institute	Third party	All groups
Ensuring equity of student experience with the primary institute	22 (42 per cent)	8 (31 per cent)	22 (43 per cent)	8 (35 per cent)	31 (39 per cent)
Providing the same level of student support and service as the primary institute	15 (28 per cent)	16 (62 per cent)	24 (47 per cent)	7 (30 per cent)	31 (39 per cent)
Training students in the importance of academic integrity	9 (17 per cent)	0	3 (6 per cent)	5 (22 per cent)	9 (11 per cent)
Ensuring students remain loyal to the third party	0	1 (4 per cent)	0	1 (4 per cent)	1 (1 per cent)
Other (please specify)	7 (13 per cent)	1 (4 per cent)	2 (4 per cent)	6 (9 per cent)	8 (10 per cent)
Total	53	26	51	23	80
	$\chi^2 (5, n = 99) = 14.80, p = .011$		$\chi^2 (5, n = 99) = 13.28, p = .021$		

Table 8 The most important aspect of governance and management at third parties

	Frequency	Per cent
Clear and consistent communication of expectations and requirements	56	70
Designated personnel to oversee compliance with primary institute procedures	14	18
Easy access to the policies and procedures of the primary institute	6	8
Meeting reporting deadlines	1	1
Other (please specify)	3	4
Total	80	100.0

experience with third party arrangements, the high level of agreement affirms this collaborative approach. While the wording of *Question 16 Are you aware of the policies and expectations of the primary institute regarding your third party arrangement?* may be problematic, the encouraging result that over 80 per cent of third party respondents indicated they were familiar with the primary institute's policies suggests that communication is effective. At Alphacrucis College, this is facilitated through quarterly management meetings at each third party campus. Our observation in those meetings confirms that they allow senior managers of the primary institute and the third party to discuss areas of concern and work to resolve differences before they escalate. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, travel to Finland and the Philippines has not been possible and interstate travel has been disrupted. While web-conferencing was implemented, face-to-face relationship-building is the preferred model.

This is not to say that there is no disagreement in the survey results. This is demonstrated in *Question 7 The most pressing challenge for learning and teaching at a third party is ...* Third party respondents indicated that third parties need training in contextualizing courses to their unique cultural, denominational, or social context (48 per cent). Christopher Ziguras and Grant McBurnie (2007) affirm the need for contextualized curriculum to encourage third party student engagement. A noteworthy representation of third party respondents (34 per cent) indicated that being given opportunities to collaborate with primary institute faculty in course and subject design is crucial. As a result of this survey, Alphacrucis College now includes third party faculty on course development and course review committees. This has led to contextualization of some content, assessments, and resources for its third parties. Third party respondents indicated that primary institutes could facilitate professional development on pedagogy and increase opportunities for faculty members to network more directly with each other through one-on-one mentoring. This supports the findings of Ming Cheng (2010, p. 270) that peer review of teaching is more beneficial than “symbolic regulation” through audits. Alphacrucis College provides workshops several times a year and has undertaken some face-to-face peer review of teaching. However, the survey responses indicate that more training and mentoring would be welcome. Non-academics saw the benefit of professional development but did not emphasize peer mentoring in the same way. It would be worth investigating why this was not seen as beneficial by non-academics. It might also help to begin a conversation around this between faculty and other staff.

Unlike many other countries, Australia's regulatory frameworks make a sharp distinction between research and scholarship. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2017) defines research as the “creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way.” This is distinct from scholarship which

the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2018) defines as: “gaining new or improved understanding, appreciation and insights into a field of knowledge, and engaging with and keeping up to date with advances in the field.” In recent years, Alphacrucis College has conducted several workshops for Alphacrucis College and third party faculty on these differences, so it was encouraging to see little variance in understanding between the sub-groups. However, the low level of engagement in research and scholarship overall by respondents is of concern. For pragmatic reasons, Christian institutes are often unwilling or unable to invest in research (Jones, 2018). Alphacrucis College encourages collaborative scholarship, such the *Dreaming and Spirit-filled Christianity* joint project between Alphacrucis College and Hillsong College faculty (Ryan & Riches, 2019). Such collaboration is made possible through shared Christian constituencies and communities. The difference in reasons for publication may display a difference in focus between faculty and other staff. Faculty emphasize the creation and sharing of knowledge. Non-academics included this but emphasize more the benefit to the institution. Perhaps the responsibilities of non-academics lead to greater ties to the institution itself.

The role of student services and support seemed to be less well-known, or at least less agreed upon. The high non-response rates to these questions and the differences found suggest that there is room to improve in the shared understanding of these activities. Some research has found that the overall student retention rate at third parties is lower than at primary institutions (Brett et al., 2018). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2019a) also highlights the potential risk of third party students not feeling supported by the primary institution. An overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of respondents agreed that the most important aspect of student services and support is “ensuring students are equipped with the skills and resources required to complete the course.” Most respondents (78 per cent) indicated that ensuring equity of experience and support between primary institute and third party students is a pressing challenge. This affirms the importance of adopting of a collaborative approach to meet the diverse needs of students. In response to this survey and our own observations regarding resourcing needs, Alphacrucis College purchased a new library services platform, in 2020, for the management of library resources and research materials. It has a multilingual function which includes Finnish. This platform is available to all Alphacrucis College’s onshore and offshore third party students which allows access to hundreds of thousands of online resources through a single catalogue search tool. When the primary institute contributes toward enhancing resourcing at the third parties, without impinging on their autonomy, it is ultimately the students who benefit.

Underpinning all successful third party arrangements sits academic governance and quality assurance (Trifiro, 2019). Survey respondents from both the primary institute and its third parties agreed that “clear and consistent communication of expectations and requirements” are paramount for effective governance and management of third parties (70 per cent). Having shared values, especially a common denominational heritage, has been a strength of Alphacrucis College’s third party arrangements. From our experience, intentional and ongoing nurturing of positive relationships, through regular formal and informal meetings, enhances collaboration and communication. Interestingly, only respondents from the primary institute reported that a single point of contact, such as a third party liaison officer, is the most important mechanism for communication. It could be that this ‘nexus’ leads to a bottleneck whereby third parties cannot easily communicate with a variety of departments across the primary institution. To ensure successful third party governance and quality assurance, primary institute and third party staff should build strong relationships across all relevant departments.

Conclusion

Independent higher education institutes in Australia are benefiting from the current market climate of expanding third party arrangements. Alphacrucis College is also utilizing its relational ties among Pentecostal colleges to extend its partnerships. There are several useful lessons from Alphacrucis College's experience. The dominant theme is that shared values and intentional, ongoing collaboration undergird successful third party arrangements. This is outworked through providing professional development and mentoring in contextualization of curriculum. Those seeking to establish offshore third party arrangements should ensure cultural sensitivity, grading moderation, and tailored delivery of content. It is also vital to foster inter-institutional research and scholarship to ensure all faculty remain current in their disciplines. Tighter policies around scholarship expectations may be required, particularly given the low priority and added expense for third parties. Tangible contributions toward enhancing resourcing for student support and services builds primary institute credibility and sustainability of the third party arrangements. While it requires increased investment, higher student satisfaction rates benefit all involved. Finally, monitoring of performance through strong academic governance and quality assurance systems is made smoother through establishing and maintaining trusting relationships. Protecting institutional culture while working in cooperation can be nurtured more readily within Christian third party arrangements with a common history and bent toward community building. The downside is a risk of familiarity and fear of constituency reprisal. Nevertheless, all private and public higher education third party arrangements could benefit from prioritizing shared values and collaborative relationships. Further research should be undertaken regarding the perspectives of third party students, as well as possible collaborative activities between primary institute and third party students.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-021-09077-1>.

Availability of data and material Data is transparent.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics approval This research was approved by the Alphacrucis College Human Research Ethics Committee.

Consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication This research has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere.

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests Not applicable.

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