

# **Internationalising the curriculum: global opportunities for VET students.**

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## **Abstract**

International activity for Australian TAFE institutes has increased significantly over the last ten years. The activity varies from institute to institute but includes delivering programs overseas, franchising courses and programs with international partners in the public and private sector and establishing links with colleges in different countries to facilitate international teaching and learning opportunities.

This paper has been written following research into international activity of one particular TAFE institute in Melbourne, Australia. Principally the research examined how different teaching centres in the institute internationalised the curriculum as part of teaching programs and concentrated in particular on an initiative known as the Global Education Network (GEN). More generally the research explored questions about globalisation and internationalisation, internationalising the curriculum and the benefits and constraints of internationalising the curriculum.

The research conclusions suggested there was no shared view about the issues and conceptual frameworks involved in this area of study, in particular globalisation. The data from the research participants supported the view that VET practitioners approach the practice and theory of internationalising the curriculum in a manner based on conceptual frameworks from within their own disciplines, which adds another layer of complexity to the debate.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the research, completed as part of a Master in Education thesis at Monash University, that provides the basis for this paper was to contribute to an understanding of internationalisation in the VET sector through an investigation into the international experience in this field of a group of staff members in a particular metropolitan TAFE college in Melbourne, Australia. A research-based activity was conducted with a small group of teaching centre managers who have responsibility for international education activity in their teaching centres. In particular the research concentrates on the experience of staff involvement with the Global Education Network (GEN), an initiative unique to this institute. This initiative provided a site for investigating the nature of internationalisation and its implications for curriculum and the organisation of teaching and learning.

Against a background of educational activity in a constantly evolving global environment, this thesis explored the principal topic of internationalising the curriculum in the Australian VET sector. The selection of Box Hill Institute (BHI) as the site of the research ought to be explained at the outset. “Global Educators” is the “brand” self-definition much used for marketing purposes of BHI and features prominently in the logo of the organisation. This is a somewhat unusual catchphrase for a VET institute, given that traditionally Australian VET institutions have provided

educational programs for local students in capital and regional cities. BHI is active internationally with extended campus arrangements in six countries and training programs in three continents.

The research examined how a selected number of teaching centres within BHI, through the work of the centre manager as educational leader and administrator, characterised and articulated their international education activities because:

1. International education has become an important field of activity for Australian VET institutions and;
2. The process or activity of internationalisation demonstrates a variety of approaches and applications.

This research focussing on the experience addressed three principal questions:

1. What is understood by internationalisation of curriculum?
2. What are the effects of internationalising the curriculum?
3. What are the benefits and constraints of internationalising the curriculum?

It was argued in the conclusion that there was no substantial measure of uniformity or opinion or practice in relation to the theory and implementation of internationalising the curriculum or internationalising teaching programs. Furthermore, it was suggested that it is possible to conclude from this virtual absence of uniformity of attitude and approach, that internationalisation is perceived through the optic of each senior educator's current view of their role as educational leader and the international or global context of their industry sector.

### **Literature review**

“The term ‘internationalisation’ describes the growth of relations between nations and between national cultures (in that sense internationalisation has a long history)...the term ‘globalisation’ is reserved here for the growing role of world systems. These world systems are situated outside and beyond the nation state, even while bearing the marks of dominant national cultures, particular American culture” (Marginson, 1999, p. 24).

The literature on globalisation, internationalisation and the internationalisation of education and curriculum is extensive (*cf* Bates, 2005; Kristensen, 2001; Marginson, 2004) and the debate is complex reflecting a broad range of views from different political and ideological points of view (Burbules, 1998; Marginson, 1999). The literature review and its compilation provided the means for making sense of the debates and issues and how understandings of globalisation, internationalisation and curriculum informed the research activities.

The issues and debates on the concept of globalisation to a large extent transcend strict disciplinary divisions. For example, Hawkrige (2003) approaches the subject from within the discipline of educational science and examines globalisation against the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and identifies the main drivers of globalisation in the service economies. The international and comparative education specialist Gacel-Avila (2005) examines the processes of globalisation in education and talks about the “globalisers” and the “globalised” as evidence of the “...unequal, divergent and

contradictory manner the processes of globalisation have developed around the planet” (p. 121).

Walsh and Rizvi (1998) examine what it means to internationalise the curriculum and put forward a position recognising that international learning activity is not simply a matter of gaining new skills in a different environment or completing the same subject in a different country. “Internationalisation of the curriculum”, they state, “is more than just a response to emergent global conditions, it is a framework of values and practices oriented towards heightened awareness and appreciation of the politics of difference as the basis for developing the necessary skills and literacies for a changing world” (Walsh and Rizvi, 1998, p. 11).

### **Research method**

The motivation for this research activity was professional and personal. On a professional level, over the last two years the researcher has had the opportunity to visit and work in a countries involved with BHI educational programs. The experience of visiting different countries, meeting various colleagues at different levels throughout different organisations, delivering programs and generally observing national education systems has given the researcher a broad base on which to examine how BHI has responded to globalisation through the implementation of the GEN. On a personal level, the experiences working with others internationally have been rewarding and have provided the researcher with much anecdotal evidence about people and their interactions in a global setting.

As this was a purpose-driven research activity, a particular group of practitioners from within organisation was recruited to participate. This was partly based on the fact that not every teaching centre manger at BHI has responsibility for international activity in the institute and therefore not everyone was suitable. The sample participants for the research were selected on the basis of international teaching activity in their respective teaching centres and the research was designed to gather information about the spread of experience within the Institute. The two selection criteria used in the process were the length of experience in international education and the range of experience in international education.

Initially, invitations were issued to potential participants to gauge the level of interest. Research participants were provided with a set of questions and interviewed in their workplace. Following the interview they were provided with a full transcript of their comments. Of the four participants only one made further comments and changes to the final transcript. The research method maintained anonymity for the participants thus the names used in the chapter on findings are fictional.

The experience of the research participants as international educators or administrators and managers of international programs varied which provided an opportunity to examine different experiences of and understandings about globalisation, internationalisation and curriculum development. The responses from the cohort were subjective, for example “in my opinion globalisation means this”, it was necessary to construct questions that encourage the participants to speak about their own experiences in the light of activity within a wider organisational setting.

## Findings and discussion

The research data and the participants' experience of internationalisation in VET provided the basis for understanding the ways in which this group of educators perceive and implement international teaching programs conceived under the aegis of a global education approach. The analysis of the data suggested there is a contrast between the theoretical understanding of globalisation as discussed in the literature review and the actual experience in the field. The conceptualisation of globalisation by the participants seemed to focus on concrete examples such as the comment by Mike that globalisation was "...us all becoming part of the one world" and that "education needs to be globalised so that people have the opportunity to move around the world." Other participants discussed globalisation from the point of view of what students might experience in an international setting, what might be called the more intangible aspects of education.

A thread of shared experience ran through the responses, evidenced by the respondents citing similar situations or circumstances when discussing particular issues. The similarities between the respondents' experience, for example as shown in discussions about the student interaction and socialisation in another country, are modified by reference to educational areas they manage, the result being that when they talk about a particular situation, event or idea, there is a combination of the generic and the specific. This interplay of general and particular understandings in the responses is a constant theme in the data and is supported by statements such as "I suppose it is the same for your students", made by Ben talking about students in another teaching centre, or "your students would have experienced something akin to what my students experienced", made by Mike about students in a different teaching centre.

In John's view the benefits of this approach go beyond the strictly educational. "It's more a case of the opportunity for the students to study in another country and to gain the benefits of socialising and all those other things in the other countries." "The sheer experience of it", comments Mike, "gets them [students and teachers] to move outside the square that they have been operating within, and take the blinkers off a little [...] really is an experience to get them re-motivated I think." This view accords with an understanding of education as not being composed purely of the "classroom" or strictly pedagogical experience but of being a wider concept that also embraces socio-cultural experience often in relation to the *locus* of formal learning.

Mike believed that a principal benefit in internationalising education is improvement in practice in this country by seeing and experiencing what is being done in the same field elsewhere. Improvement came from "seeing how they deliver for their students, what facilities they have, how they carry out their assessment practice [and] what sort of experiences the students are exposed to both within the institute and within the industry." He summed this up as "...examining their system and comparing it to ours and seeing other benefits from theirs and ours." The data suggested many of the benefits of internationalised education were intangible, or at least not strictly "pedagogical". "I think on a staff level", said Mike, "and to the students that have gone over, the sheer experience of it gets them to move outside the square that they have been operating in and take of the blinkers for a little bit..." Students were not the only beneficiaries. "...By having staff from the US and Canada come here and for our staff to go over there, that experience exchange they had both culturally and

educationally really is an experience to get them re-motivated...I think in terms of the rejuvenation that gives them [the improvement in] their own teaching experience is probably 80% of the value that we get out of the program.”

The data in the research showed differences in approaches to curriculum development and design for international programs (which is particularly significant given the national quality framework that exists in the VET sector in Australia). It also emerged from the responses that one can be too ambitious in trying to match programs with international partners. Pete had worked the longest of all the respondents on international programs and commented that when BHI began exploring the opportunities for internationalisation, ambitious projects were established to create an “international qualification that would allow students to do some time at BHI and then some time overseas”. To achieve this outcome a lot of effort was spent between the partner organisations mapping the curriculum in detail. Owing to a number of factors this endeavour proved too cumbersome and complex and was never implemented. “I think”, Pete concluded, “we ran out of puff on that one”. In contrast Mike has adopted a policy of minimal curriculum change and development, which has facilitated international education activity without the opportunity to gain a joint international qualification.

Ben thought that differences between an international and a localised curriculum depended on the material being taught. With computer technology for example, as a purely theoretical subject, the differences were minimal because “...standards worldwide are all consistent”. But where computer technology needs to be adapted to local demands and usages curriculum differences emerge. “When you look away from the computing area, to say, telecommunications, which we deliver in Hanoi,” said Ben, “[t]hen we need to make sure that [the] curriculum we do, the competencies that we are testing are related to the local industry. And certainly the course we do there is tailored compared to what we do here [in Australia]”.

Further research is required to determine the factors influencing the senior educators’ perspective but it would appear there is a difference in perception or view about international activity at what one might term the corporate level of the organisation (vision, mission and strategic plan) and the operational level of the organisation (the day-to-day business of teaching and learning), and a distinct (yet to be fully identified and articulated) difference about what it means for people in each of these areas to be involved in internationalising the curriculum and global education activity.

## **Conclusion**

Although the research participants manage or administer different teaching centres in specific technical and vocational areas, their responses indicated common themes and issues. For example, they all agreed that an important aspect of internationalisation for students was the opportunity to socialise with people of the host nation, which is an interesting contrast with the emphasis in much of the literature that discusses the development of the pedagogical aspects of internationalising the curriculum. The respondents commented on the informal learning that takes place through socialisation which is not directly linked to the development of new skills or furthering technical competence while studying overseas. Rather the social activities develop what have been termed “soft skills”. The experience of being immersed in the cultural practices

of a host country provides students with skill development opportunities in communication, problem solving, intercultural learning and reflection. These skills underpin and reinforce the vocational learning that takes place in the classroom and formal training environment both in Australia and in host countries. This socio-cultural element of learning in an international context broadens the pedagogical framework of VET.

The research revealed that at the teaching centre level there is strong enthusiasm for international activity and that managers are supportive of students and teachers participating in international exchanges and global education programs. The extent of difference between the respondents over these and other issues is an important consideration for any educational institution in terms of quality assurance and meeting statutory and legislative requirements such as the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Given, as discussed in the literature, that globalisation does not impose uniformity, rather it promotes multiple responses depending on the situation and its requirements, the application of national quality systems such as the AQTF would seem antithetical to the internationalisation programs and projects currently under way throughout the TAFE sector.

The effects of globalisation of different forms of globalisation and the relatively recent term “glocalisation” indicate that not all the things happening internationally are the same and that what happens has certain consequences in Australia which are not the same in say Canada, Chile or China. International education and internationalising the curriculum, which is part of the process of globalisation, involve an engagement that takes place in and beyond formal and informal learning spaces. And so it could be argued that the most appropriate approach to internationalising the curriculum would be something organic (mimicking some of the processes of globalisation itself), adopting a consistent and flexible strategy that is recognised and executed in a variety of settings such as the interpersonal, the institutional, the regional and the local. The implementation of this approach would encourage and support the development of different kinds of educational and training cultures that are not yet thought of but will be relevant for the globalised environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ensure VET graduates can confidently work and live in the global village.

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## Appendix One

**Table 1.**

### Research participants' international or global activity

**This table shows the extent of international experience for each of the research participants together with information about the international education activities in their teaching centre.**

Participant name	Mike	Ben	Pete	John
Participated in international staff exchange	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
Experience writing curriculum for offshore programs		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
Teaching centre offers programs in conjunction with the GEN	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Teaching centre offers a "semester abroad" program through the GEN				
Experience teaching in another country		<b>X</b>		
Centre provides accredited programs internationally	<b>X</b>			
Centre provides informal international exchange programs for staff and students	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
Centre offers courses for international students at Box Hill Institute	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		
Number of teaching staff involved in international programs offshore	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>2</b>

## **Appendix Two**

Interview questions for research participants

What do you think it means to internationalise the curriculum and how would you describe or characterise an internationalised curriculum?

What have you learnt about good teaching and learning practice(s) from international exchanges for staff and students in your teaching centre?

What benefits and value have been derived for your centre and your staff from the investment in international experience?

How is internationalising the curriculum an innovation in your centre?

How is the globalised education experience different for students and teachers in your centre?