Equivalence and contextualisation in Transnational Education

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Between 2005 and 2007, the Australian Government's *Transnational Quality Strategy* funded 36 different projects that looked at Australian Transnational Education (TNE) provision of Higher Education (HE), Vocational Education and Training (VET) and ELT (English Language Teaching) offshore with the aim of promoting the quality of Australian TNE. The reports of these projects have highlighted a number of issues for Australian providers of transnational education. To what extent should Australian providers customise and contextualise their programs to make programs more meaningful and relevant for offshore students? To what extent are offshore students buying an "Australian educational experience"? And what does that entail in an increasingly globalised and internationalised context?

Introduction

This paper draws on the findings of projects funded by Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations (DEEWR) (formerly Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)) which formed part of the government's *Transnational Quality Strategy*. As a multisectoral institution, VU was fortunate to receive funding in each of the rounds of funding and participated in HE, VET and ELT projects examining VU's partner arrangements in China. VU's HE project, *Improving Language and Learning Support for Offshore Students* (2005), developed a model of supporting students' academic and English Language skills in offshore programs. It examined the issue of equivalence in relation to student support, students' English proficiency and the student experience more broadly. In a change of focus, VU's VET and ELT projects examined quality systems and curriculum offshore and recommended internationalising the curriculum in programs in HE, VET and ELT sectors both onshore and offshore. Some of the other 36 *Transnational Quality Strategy* projects had similar findings and recommendations. Many of these projects comment on the urgent need for TNE programs delivered offshore to be customised and contextualised. Most of the projects mentioned equivalence as a quality issue.

The VET and ELT projects undertaken by VU will be used to discuss customising, contextualising and internationalising the curriculum and the accompanying issue of equivalence: *Quality Matters: promoting quality improvement for offshore VET programs* (2006) and *Quality English: internationalised, shared, equivalent* (2007).[1] *Quality Matters* examined the delivery of Certificate III ESL (Further Study), the Diploma of Business and the Diploma of IT in VU's partner arrangements with two Chinese universities. *Quality English* particularly focussed on quality assurance of the Certificate III ESL (Further Study) and the curriculum used in VU's programs in China. This paper will also refer to the subsequent work undertaken by Australian Education International (AEI) to distil and disseminate the messages and resources of the *Transnational Quality Strategy* projects. Primarily, AEI's work is being achieved in the short term through the publication of *Good Practice in Offshore Delivery: a Guide for Australian Providers* (2008, publication pending).

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[1] These reports and accompanying resources are available on AEI's password protected website at http://aei.DEEWR.gov.au/AEI?GovernmentActivities/QAAustralianEducationAnd TrainingSystem/Grants_GdPract.htm

Background
Two themes will come under scrutiny. Firstly, the issues around equivalence and contextualisation will be discussed in relation to student experience, assessment, learning outcomes and teaching and learning strategies. Secondly, the issue of internationalisation will be examined with regard to offshore programs in China: to what extent should Australian providers be internationalising curriculum and teaching methods for offshore programs if Australian educational programs form part of China's own internationalising agenda?

Quality Matters: promoting quality improvement for offshore VET programs (2006) and *Quality English: internationalised, shared, equivalent* (2007) stress that TNE programs and teaching need to heed the cultural contexts of delivery; that resources need to be contextualised and customised. Further, both reports recommend that curriculum, including teaching approaches and evaluation strategies and tools, be internationalised. A further important point is particularly made in *Quality English* about internationalising the curriculum; that is, the *how* of internationalising matters: internationalisation of curriculum, pedagogies, evaluation strategies and quality assurance must be done in collaboration with offshore partners otherwise it risks being a neo-imperialist activity. While contextualising and internationalising concern all sectors of TNE, VET does present issues that cannot be generalised; I have tried to distinguish specific VET concerns from the more general discussion.

Methodology
While VU's two projects differed in some particulars, both projects adopted a range of research approaches. Both projects conducted interviews with Victoria University staff and VU partner staff in China. Importantly, both projects conducted cultural audits: *Quality Matters* (2006) conducted a cultural audit on Diploma of IT resources, assessment and pedagogy while *Quality English* (2007) conducted a cultural audit on English Resources used in China. As part of the cultural audit, *Quality English* used an Internationalising Checklist developed in collaboration with Chinese partner staff and developed a model of internationalised English curriculum – again in consultation with partner staff. A fundamental part of the *Quality English* project was that partner staff were invited to Australia to contribute to the curriculum, the professional development resources, evaluation tools and to co-develop an approach to internationalising. Collaboration was part of the project's methodology and was both well regarded and highly valued by partners.

Contextualisation, customisation and equivalence
VU's projects examining their VET and ELT programs in China especially highlight the need to be aware of the offshore context, the need to customise resources and the need to professionally develop culturally competent staff. In addition to more general diversity matters, staff also need to be aware of and respectful of different educational traditions and for VET teachers to understand different workplace cultures – so teachers' frames of reference also need to be contextualised. Alongside claims for curriculum and teaching methods offshore to be different from onshore, there are, simultaneously, insistent demands that on- and offshore education be equivalent, although more recently there has been a move to the requiring programs to be comparable.

Equivalence and comparability
The emphasis on the need to contextualise resources, curriculum and teaching methods has put pressure on one of the four principals of the AEI's *Transnational Quality Strategy*: "Courses/programs delivered within Australia and transnationally should be equivalent in the standard of delivery and outcomes of the course, as determined by nationally recognised quality assurance arrangements" (AEI, 2005). In the last year, there has been a definite shift away from thinking that programs need to be equivalent and a move to requiring that they now need to be comparable (Guthrie, 2007). The distinction between equivalence and comparability might be likened to the difference between credit transfer and RPL. Many European documents on quality assurance of cross-border education refer to "comparability"[2] of courses and, in Australia, the AVCC Guidelines use "comparability" rather than "equivalence". Arguably, the equivalence issues for VET offshore are even more complex than for higher education given the differences not only in workplace legislation but also workplace cultures.

The use of comparability over equivalence is becoming more wide spread: "The use of "comparability" recognises the extent of engagement of importing countries in the transnational endeavour. This goes some way to constructing transnational education as a mutually productive and reciprocal engagement" (AEI, 2008). Comparability allows for greater cultural and linguistic differences than does equivalence and, as the preceding quotation suggests, invites partner input; thus it has the capacity to encourage more culturally appropriate programs.[3]

While some of this terminological debate can be seen as inconsequential hair-splitting by teachers on the ground, it is also true that, upon closer inspection, it is more realistic to expect that programs, while equivalent in terms of learning outcomes, program purpose, evaluation tools, teacher qualifications, facilities and resources, also be relevant and appropriate to the student cohort and the culture in which they are delivered: "The notion of 'equivalence' of quality assurance processes and of learning needs to be contextualised in the wider quality issue of pedagogical and cultural appropriateness" (Woodley, 2006). Equivalence was never meant to imply sameness but it does signify more similarity than comparability. Carmichael (2005) reminds us that 'identical' is a culturally problematic notion and the *Good Practice* projects were united on that front: you cannot deliver the same programs on- and offshore. However, we do need to determine what can be changed while ensuring equivalence or comparability.

The key issues for equivalence of learning outcomes primarily involves the issue of equivalence of learning outcomes while teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks need to be comparable. The attempt to quantify how much a program can be contextualised might be helpful in regards to content: JCU requires that curriculum and assessment offshore should be fundamentally the same as onshore but allows for up to 20 per cent of content and assessment to be varied to suit local students.[4] If an onshore program was already internationalised, 20% would certainly

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[2] See for example UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education, 2005, at http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf accessed 1/02/2008.
[3] See *Good Practice in Offshore Delivery: a guide for Australian Providers* (AEI, 2008) for a full discussion of equivalence and comparability.

[4] JCU's work on equivalence is useful:
www.jcu.edu.au/asd/quality/Equivalence_in_QA5AB_endorsed.d.htm

enable some localising of the curriculum to occur. These changes focus on content: the amount of change permissible to the student experience could be something else again.

Such a massive reconceptualisation of offshore TNE that serious contextualisation requires has significant implications for Australian educators working offshore and onshore: from Training Packages to teaching qualifications. Ideas of customisation, contextualisation and internationalisation need to be unpacked and examined while cognisant of the need to be able to demonstrate comparability. The extent to which programs are adjusted for offshore delivery raise a number of other questions: To what extent should Australian providers customise and contextualise their programs to make programs more meaningful and relevant for offshore students? Is 20% about right and who makes that 20% alteration? To what extent are offshore students buying an "Australian educational experience"? And what does that entail in an increasingly globalised and internationalised context? To what extent does English play a part in Australian qualifications? Global qualifications? Australian trade qualifications? If English is soon to be spoken by more so-called non-native speakers than native speakers, how important is Standard English? Too many questions to address, here – but pressing questions nonetheless.

Crucial in all these teaching and learning issues from a quality perspective is who, in a partner arrangement, sets assessment, who marks assessment and what criteria are used in marking assessment. Assessment, that is, the demonstration of student learning, has to be the key to ensuring equivalent outcomes, if not inputs. Most of the *Good Practice* projects insisted that Australian providers must control all these processes: others settled for Australian providers being involved in pre- and post-assessment moderation. How far assessment might be internationalised is another intriguing question.

Training Packages
While the concept of comparability may allow for greater customisation, arguably the tension between the prescribed structure of training packages and what the students want and need offshore cannot easily be circumvented without risking AQTF non-compliance. Some of the competencies comprising a training package are mandatory, specific to Australian industry and/or Australian law and cannot be customised to the extent that would make them relevant and appropriate for offshore students who do not necessarily want to work in Australia. While contextualisation and customisation may be interchangeable terms in general discourse, in VET discourse, they have distinct and very different meanings.

Contextualisation refers to "tailoring units of competency to suit specific needs". Contextualisation allows training packages to be flexibly delivered through modifying units of competency to better reflect local needs. That being said, however, there are guidelines that must be complied with. Restrictions to contextualising training packages include not being able remove the number and content of elements and performance criteria to be achieved and being able to add specific industry terminology to performance criteria only where this does not distort or narrow the competency outcomes (DEST, 2007). Contextualisation is not always sufficient to render all aspects of Training Packages relevant and meaningful in China.

Customisation, in relation to Training Packages, specifically refers to the packaging of a program; that is, **"packaging rules means making available a choice of units within the packaging arrangements of a training package to suit local clients and/or conditions"** (DEST, 2007). Customisation could well form part of a contextualising process but, again, the rules guiding these processes may be too rigid for some offshore clients.

The DEST website on working with Training Packages asks the question: "What if existing qualifications do not suit an identified need?" What, indeed? The answer provided is of course the one TNE operators need to collectively pursue: "If an identified need cannot be met by packaging or contextualising a training package qualification, it may be necessary to explore the option of developing a course for accreditation" (DEST, 2007). Either international perspectives need to be invited at development stage of Training Packages or curriculum must be developed by individual institutions.

VET to HE

The various stakeholders involved in the delivery of VET offshore (partners, students, local teachers, VU teachers and Australian industry) have "quite different expectations of what the VET system should deliver" (Blom and Myers, 2003: 40). For VU's students offshore, as is the case with many of the other TQS projects, what students want is a pathway from VET to higher education, not a VET qualification. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) website states clearly that the focus of VET is learning in and for the workplace. There are two issues here: using VET only as a Pathway to higher education and "the workplace". Culturally, "the workplace" is not a universalised entity and training packages were never intended to develop English language and study skills to the extent that Chinese students need.

Given that many of the VET Business students in China want to articulate into degrees, the narrow vocation reference of training packages is doubly problematic. VET providers in China need to recall that it is often VET's association with universities that attract students in China. One operator offshore is blunt: "'If it weren't for the fact that we have these agreements with the unis…a lot of them wouldn't even bother to talk to us…'" (cited in Moran and Ryan: 50). So VET providers need to be realistic about what students need. If they don't need the whole qualification, it is an option for RTOs to use of Statements of Attainment, rather than whole Certificate awards be issued to better accommodate the needs of the students. It is also pertinent to consider developing curriculum that will be more internationalised and more appropriate to developing students' English language and study skills in readiness for English language higher education degrees.

Contextualisation more broadly

The key message on the broader issue of contextualisation, of course, is that programs that are successful in Australia cannot be transplanted offshore and be expected to produce similarly successful outcomes for students. Smith and Smith (1999) caution that "cultural imperialism…can attend the delivery of VET programs designed for one culture [and delivered] into another" (2). Similarly, Moran and Ryan (2004) warn that "Globalisation presents Australian VET providers with a potentially large, new and diverse client group whose occupational, social and politico-legal environments are based on norms and standards that can differ considerably form the assumptions

underlying the Australian competency-based model of training". While DEST (2005) insists Training Package developers "use a network of industry contacts to ensure learning is relevant to current workplace practice", how far that network extends to ensure global and more particularly South East Asia representation is unknown. Perhaps it is not until teachers deliver Training Packages offshore do they realise how "culture bound" (Moran and Ryan, 2004) Australian training programs are. It is important to recall, too, "what Training Packages are not designed to do" (ANTA, 2004: 42) – they were not designed to operate in China.

Training Packages are not just "culture bound" in the sense that they are produced in Australia for Australian industries: "VET works for people giving Australians world-class skills and knowledge" states a heading outlining Australia's National VET Strategy in *Shaping Our Future*. "Chinese" cannot simply replace "Australians". In support materials for VET teachers, there is little on teaching NESB students or teaching offshore. *Contextualising teaching and learning* (2005) never mentions offshore settings in all of its examples of delivery modes. For all the times "the workplace" is mentioned, it is never offshore. What the report does say is that contextualising is "the activity undertaken by a teacher to make units of competency meaningful to the learner. This involves incorporating industry or enterprise work practices into the teaching and learning process" (6). Interviewees thought that comparative approaches for some Business subjects would be more meaningful to students; Australian Business Law and Australian Taxation Law, for example, would benefit from a comparative approach. One teacher pointed out, that "You could end up failing someone on the basis of something not in the Training Package" if you try to make existing training packages relevant.

To teach an internationalised curriculum to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China requires expertise beyond that which is required by the Certificate IV Assessment and Workplace Training as the comparative approach demonstrates. To teach Australian Taxation Law comparatively, teachers would need to know Chinese Taxation Law to be able to discuss the two systems. Skills required to teach offshore are complex: VET teachers in China need to be the discipline expert, the English Language teacher and the teacher of intercultural communication skills. Again, the Certificate IV Assessment and Workplace Training does not reflect this. Perhaps just as importantly, the Chinese Ministry of Education does not regard the Certificate IV Assessment and Workplace Training qualification as sufficient for Foreign Teachers in China: foreign teachers need to have an undergraduate qualification, a teaching certificate and at least two years teaching experience in order to teach in China.

Internationalising the Curriculum
Amid demands for programs to be internationalised, customised and/or contextualised, there seems to be a range of interpretations as to what this might mean and how it might occur in a culturally appropriate way. Internationalising in the VET sector, in particular, can mean anything from getting a product into the international arena – just selling education offshore – to benchmarking against international standards to ensuring technical interoperability (Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2004). Smith and Smith are adamant, however, that: "Internationalisation is not just about offering services to people of other nations" (1999) – although this service provision may well form part of a broader internationalising agenda.

While cognisant of the idea that "Internationalisation of VET is a process of change whereby VET responds to the challenge of the emerging international world order in all it dimensions: economic, technological, social and cultural" (Schofield 1997: 9), internationalising in the *Good Practice* reports overwhelmingly refers to the immediate need to internationalise curriculum – and this includes what we teach, how we teach and how we evaluate our educational programs. These concerns have ongoing implications in VET in the development and delivery of training packages, as well as the teaching styles, qualifications and the intercultural competence of teaching staff.

Internationalising in VET could mean including global perspectives and within content and teaching design, contextualising or customising existing programs for offshore delivery, emphasising "transferable and required skills to equip students for work in modern day industry and enterprises" (Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2004) over "content" or it could just mean marketing Australian education offshore. All too often, internationalising is conflated or equated with either having international students[5] or simply delivering to an international cohort. While the presence of international students onshore and the experience of offshore delivery may well galvanise activity on Internationalising, a curriculum can be internationalised without a single international student in sight. After a baptism of fire, teachers' often become keenly aware to include the development of intercultural skills in an internationalised curriculum.

If Australian educational programs, both on- and offshore were internationalised, less customisation would be required and comparability or even equivalence between on- and offshore would be more apparent. It is essential that internationalisation of the curriculum be achieved through collaboration with offshore partner staff. VU's experience in the *Quality English* project demonstrated that collaborative curriculum offers a key to developing an equivalent yet culturally appropriate and meaningful program. To refigure topics, activities and assessment to encourage an internationalised curriculum for Chinese students does not involve Australian teachers choosing an "Asian" topic and finding some articles about it – even in an Asian English-language paper. Hudson and Morris (in Liddicoat 2003: 71) are emphatic about internationalising curriculum in higher education: "It is not enough for academics to make multicultural gestures." Collaboration on curriculum development is needed at every stage – otherwise Australian educators risk tokenistic and neo-imperialist practices. Internationalised Training Packages require a great deal of collaboration from offshore educators and industry.

It is perhaps timely at this point to recall that, with all the concerns about appropriate curriculum and what are really long term proposals for curriculum development, students are not a static, homogenous cohort. As one Chinese colleague commented: "Modern Chinese students are expecting something new and exciting from both their Chinese and non-Chinese teachers." (Woodley, 2007: 2). Business and education in China are both growing and changing exponentially. We need to think about teaching 'content', industry contexts, teaching styles and we urgently need to think about

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[5] See, for example, DEST's website at
www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/trainingtalk/issue_02/aei.htm that celebrates how much money international VET students bring to the economy. This is described as "The internationalisation of our VET system".

educations technologies: "Today's students – immersed in an increasingly digital world – are seeking richer and more engaging learning experiences" (Macquarie University, 2005 cited in AEI, 2008). Teachers, curriculum developers and professional developers certainly have their work cut out for them.

What we teach

According to one definition, internationalising the curriculum could mean adapting Australian educational programs for an offshore cohort. A teacher might use an article from *China Daily News* instead of *The Age,* they might change a biblical reference to loaves and fishes to a more general comment about making do with less and they might delete the local example of the company in Mildura under investigation for exploiting foreign workers as it seems a bit parochial in Beijing. Some teachers are explicit in their teaching, careful in either using plain English or explaining colloquial terms. This same teacher might watch local English news channels to make references to local events – and this is certainly a good start. Collaboration with partner staff, who already customise aspects of the program for their students, would result in a less tokenistic approach. Peppering existing materials with an exotic smattering of case studies or readings is the most obvious knee jerk response to the need to internationalise and it is not appropriate.We need to be asking:

- Who is internationalising the curriculum?
- Who decides what is international?
- How are diverse views incorporated?
- Is the identity of an Australian education product maintained?
- Does internationalisation allow for local and Australian content, references and idiosyncrasies?

A globalised curriculum could impose sameness everywhere so that education is dissociated "from the social, cultural and political origins of a country" (Hallak cited in Ziguras and Rizvi, 2001: 155). The *Quality English* project developed Principles of Internationalising and an Internationalising Checklist that ensures the local is not swamped by the global. The checklist items are designed to ensure that all ELT teaching and learning material used and developed by teachers and curriculum developers

- Is explicit about the cultural context or assumptions of the topic

- Creates a learning environment where students are comfortable about comparing cultural perspectives

- Offers or invites multiple cultural perspectives in any reading

- Includes resources that are produced by writers from a range of cultures

- Invites comparisons with the same phenomenon or topics in a range of cultures

- Develops students' ability to reflect on their own cultural perspectives on an issue (Woodley, 2007).

But what does this mean for Australian qualifications? What is distinctly Australian about internationalised Australian qualifications in a global market?

How we teach
There needs to be a balance between the idea that students offshore are buying an "Australian educational experience" – whatever that means – and the need to teach in a manner that actually enables learning. Australian teaching staff should teach in a manner that is respectful of students educational traditions and English levels. Resources should ensure a mix of local and international references – and that is the easy part. Teachers also need to be mindful that communicative teaching approaches are only one way to teach and that many students in China are mystified by questions shot at them by teachers and expectations to "discuss" issues and offer opinions. The effectiveness of learner-centeredness is culturally determined: we need to have a firm understanding of our own teaching practices, why we do what we do and how we think our students learn: and we need to understand that some students might be disadvantaged by the way we teach.

'Learner-centeredness has provided a banner for the moral superiority of the communicative approach' (Holliday 1994 in Pennycook: 175). We need to be mindful that the communicative approach is only one way to teach and that the effectiveness of learner-centeredness is also culturally determined. Offshore, the assumed moral superiority of Western teaching methods is as arrogant as it is unhelpful to students. Offshore teachers should seek partner feedback on their teaching, they should seek to understand how their students learn and should not impose their own unexamined teaching practises on students unfamiliar with communicative pedagogies.

So, yes, students offshore may need, enjoy and even expect some exposure to "Australian teaching styles", to colloquial English, to resources that may include unfamiliar places, cultures and values: but teachers need to be careful not to exclude students, to be careful not to inhibit learning and to be careful not to offend. Professional development opportunities for teaching staff working offshore are currently left to the institution to arrange: but internationalising teaching pedagogy should feature in mandatory qualifications for teachers working offshore.

Internationalising and Globalising – where does localising fit in?
If it is the case that materials used in Melbourne are so internationalised, and the language of instruction and the cultural assumptions about learning and teaching are also so internationalised that any particular national bias has been eradicated from the curriculum, the push for comparability between on- and offshore programs would be less insistent. In his talk 'Ensuring Offshore Quality' (2005), Carmichael mentions 'a gradual move from thinking in terms of Australian education overseas, to thinking about locally-relevant education provided by an Australian-based university'; but it hasn't happened yet and it certainly hasn't happened in VET programs. A common refrain from teachers and managers alike is that, "They're getting an Australian qualification" – but that does seem somewhat parochial in a global age and yet we haven't worked out how such qualifications can be locally relevant.

At Victoria University, like many Australian universities, Internationalising broadly aims to develop students' international perspectives – particularly in their professional and discipline areas. Internationalising covers broad areas like intercultural communication skills, cultural awareness and more specific knowledge of particular cultures. China's Ministry of Education (MoE) is also aware of the need to develop cross-cultural skills: "colleges and universities should cover components of learning

strategies and intercultural communication in their teaching so as to enhance students' abilities of independent learning and of communication" (MoE, 2004: 21). It would be timely to tap into the MoE's internationalising drive for mutual benefit. Overall, there is a demand for education programs offshore that is not currently being met by Australian training packages. Educational institutions in Australia and offshore have had internationalising on the curriculum on the agenda for over a decade. It is time Training Packages started being developed with and for offshore clients in collaborative arrangements that would be mutually beneficial.

Conclusions

A number of good practice projects conducted between 2005 and 2007 as part of the Australian Government's *Transnational Quality Strategy* to improve transnational educational have highlighted the need to balance an internationalised approach to curriculum development and teaching with an awareness of local context. Any internationalising "of curriculum, pedagogies, evaluation strategies and quality assurance must be done in collaboration with offshore partners" (Woodley, 2007) or risk being inappropriate.

"Internationalisation of TAFE is not a luxury or soft option for TAFE but is rather an essential component in the adaptation of TAFE to the emerging condition of the 21st century" (Australia TAFE International, 1996). Twelve years ago, that statement probably referred to delivering offshore. Today, internationalisation is still not a soft option – it is still essential if VET is going to adapt to the emerging condition of the 21st century. But internationalisation now is about relationships with partners, developing international perspectives in staff and students, using technologies to learn, research and collaborate. It is a far more reciprocal internationalisation that is called for now, just as much about collaborative curriculum development and professional development as it is about marketing.

And, finally, it is important to state that to achieve educationally meaningful internationalised curriculum is an expensive undertaking that must be resourced.

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