

# **PEDAGOGY NOT POLITICAL POINTSCORING: HOW TRAINING PROVIDERS TEACH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

2009 was a bad year for Australia's international vocational education and training (VET) industry. Racism affecting international students on the streets and in the national media discouraged students from applying to study in Australia and made international education the centre of political controversy. In such an environment it has been easy to lose sight of the teaching and learning processes that are at the heart of VET for international students. This paper reports on part of a research project, funded by Service Skills Australia, that examined VET practitioners in the service industries. As part of that project the author carried out case studies in two Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that delivered training to substantial numbers of hospitality students and interviewed senior managers from four other RTOs. Staff and students alike reported on the benefits of having international students enrolled in their courses, and reported instances of good practice in pedagogy that have implications well beyond the international student cohort.

## **Introduction**

In recent years the growth in numbers of overseas students in Australia has come mainly from VET rather than from higher education (Ross, 2008; Tran & Nyland, 2009). Much of the debate on VET for international students during 2009 in particular was negative and critical, focusing on RTOs seen as 'dodgy' or on the activities of overseas agents of education providers. Racist attacks on Indian students, particularly in Melbourne, have battered Australia's reputation overseas particularly in the Indian sub-continent (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett & Marginson, 2010). Spokespeople for the university sector, particularly from the Group of Eight 'sandstone' universities, in attempts to divert negative attention from their own sector, seem to attack the growing numbers of students enrolled in VET (eg Group of Eight Ltd, 2009). Until recently most of the 'positive' press has related only to the importance of international students to the national economy (eg Access Economics, 2009), while ignoring the other benefits that accrue to Australia and Australians. Few people in the popular or professional press have seemed prepared to advocate for the students and for the people who teach them.

The current attacks on RTOs catering for international students may well be buttressed by the fact that some of the programs popular with international students – those examined in this paper – provide training for occupations that are sometimes viewed as being of low status and unimportant. 'Cooks and hairdressers' are often mentioned disparagingly in the debates over appropriate courses from international students as though these jobs are somehow less worthy than other occupations (Birrell, Healy and Kinnaird, 2007). Yet the shortage of chefs and hairdressers is well-documented, and western economies continue to move away from primary and secondary industries towards the service sector (Triplett & Bosworth, 2004). The

belittling of service industry occupations by the supporters of traditional men's occupations is, of course, a manifestation of the social construction of skill (Steinberg 1990, Smith 2009) and a longstanding issue for the service industries. Although it is impossible to prove, it is likely that the decision by the federal government early in 2009 to remove chefs and hairdressers from the 'critical skills' list used for immigration purposes (Birrell & Perry, 2009) was affected by campaigning by anti-service industry and anti-immigration commentators.

A feature of anti-international education commentators such as Birrell, Healy & Kinnaird (2007) is that their writing is not based on empirical research in RTOs or with international students. Their arguments instead are focused on the fact that students who come here to study certain qualifications are eligible to apply for immigration as a result of their studies (Birrell, Healy & Kinnaird, 2009). In their minds this is seen as a bad thing, a curious position considering that the vast majority of Australians are immigrants or descended from immigrants.

This paper attempts to provide some empirical data about VET for international students, focusing on pedagogical and not political issues. As part of a 2009 project on VET practitioners undertaken for Service Skills Australia, the Industry Skills Council for the service industries, research was undertaken in RTOs that cater for international students; interviews were undertaken with students (international and domestic), teachers, managers and partnering enterprises. The project was one of three in Service Skills Australia's 'New Deal', aimed at identifying ways to improve the quality of training and assessment for the service industries. The larger project included a series of focus groups with industry representatives from the various service industries, eight case studies in service skills RTOs, a survey of all RTOs providing training in service skills Training Packages, validation workshops, and a number of additional interviews in specialist areas.

## **Literature review**

Scholarly literature on the political aspects of VET for overseas students is as yet slim, apart from the work of Birrell and colleagues which is all published in a journal which the author co-edits, *People and Place*. The 2009 debate took place instead in the general media and in publications specialising in VET and higher education matters. While some public commentators support the position of Birrell and colleagues (eg Young, 2009), others such as Hawthorne (2009) maintain that a link between the education of overseas students and immigration is a positive policy initiative and one being increasingly adopted in other countries.

Literature on the pedagogy associated with international VET students is also relatively slight. An early paper by Navaratnam & Mountney (1992) on overseas students in TAFE Institutes in Queensland suggested that greater support services needed to be provided for these students. They indicated that strategies to increase motivation of the students and to improve English proficiency were central to students' satisfaction. However the available recent literature on overseas students seems to be confined mainly to the higher education area, focusing on issues such as the effects of teacher attitudes on their work with international students (Arenas, 2009), learning style preferences (Lashley & Barron, 2006), English language

proficiency (Arkoudis et al, 2009) and pastoral care (Sawir, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2009). Tran & Nyland (2009) highlight the lack of available research in the VET sector and are currently carrying out a research project in this area. In general it would be reasonable to summarise the available literature as stating that international students, particularly Asian students who form the vast majority of Australian's overseas student population (Australian Education International (AEI), 2008<sup>1</sup>), are used to pedagogical practices which emphasise reproduction rather than construction of knowledge, have difficulties with English language, and suffer some challenges in adjusting to living and working life in Australia.

With relation to the latter point, international students do not all come from wealthy backgrounds, as Butcher and McGrath (2004) state, and many need to accept low-standard accommodation and to work to support themselves. Their visas allow only 20 hours work a week. While their working lives have been little researched, a new publication by Nyland *et al* (2009), albeit based on university rather than VET students, suggests that they may be open to exploitation in the labour market. Recent research undertaken as part of a national project on student-working (Smith & Patton, in progress) indicates that the availability of work at appropriate hours is an important factor in overseas students' experience in Australia and is also reported by students to influence the operating hours of some training providers. While these issues are not central to pedagogy they affect the way in which RTOS and teachers interact with students.

## **Research method**

As mentioned earlier, the research reported in this paper took place as part of a larger national project. Ethics approval was provided by the University of Ballarat.

The qualitative findings discussed in this paper are drawn from the following sources:

- Telephone interviews with senior managers in four RTOs operating between them in four States, providing training in hospitality, tourism and events, retail, and hairdressing to large numbers of overseas students. Telephone interviews were undertaken rather than site visits for reasons of budget and time.
- Two case studies (one public, one private) in RTOs providing hospitality, which both had large numbers of overseas students. The case studies involved a number of interviews (see Table 1 for details) most of which were undertaken on-site during one-day face-to-face visits, with four interviews in total subsequently undertaken by phone because a few respondents were not available on the day of the visit. . These case studies were two of eight in the larger project and were selected for this paper as they were undertaken by the author, as were the telephone interviews.

Case study RTOs were suggested by focus groups of service industry representatives, during an earlier phase of the project. Representatives attending these groups, generally human resource or training staff, or managers of small businesses, were

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<sup>1</sup> For example, of 148,000 overseas students studying in Victoria in 2008, 90,000 were from just four Asian countries: India, China, Malaysia and Vietnam (AEI, 2008).

asked to nominate RTOs whom they believed showed good practice in their teaching/training.

After an attempt to work through ACPET (the Australian Council for Private Education and Training) proved unsuccessful, the telephone interview participants were drawn from a list suggested by Service Skills Australia. From a list of six potential participants, three agreed to participate. The fourth telephone interview was the result of a private RTO manager agreeing to an interview only, having been approached in relation to a case study.

The questioning areas focused on teaching and teachers. For the case study visits, detailed protocols were drawn up for each type of respondent (see Table 1, RTOs 5 and 6, for the exact nature of each respondent) and are too lengthy to be included in this paper. To give a sample, the protocol for teachers is included as Appendix 1. The telephone interviews with managers were based on the case study interview protocol for managers.

The participating RTOs are listed in Table 1. In total, 20 interviews took place.

**Table 1: Details of RTOs interviewed by telephone about international students**

RTO no.	Job title of interviewee/s	Type	Industry	Type of involvement
1	Manager VET programs	Commercial (metropolitan)	Hospitality & Hairdressing	Telephone interview
2	Manager of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management	TAFE (metropolitan)	Hospitality	Telephone interview
3	Principal Education Officer	Commercial (metropolitan)	Hair & beauty	Telephone interview
4	Skill Centre Manager, Retail & Personal Services	TAFE (regional)	Hair & beauty	Telephone interview
5	Managing Director, HR Manager, Trainers (2), Students (2), HR Manager from partnering enterprise	Commercial (metropolitan)	Hospitality	Case study
6	Acting HR manager, Learning & Development Manager, Senior Educator, Teachers (2), Students (2), HR Managers from partnering enterprises (2)	TAFE (metropolitan)	Hospitality	Case study

Face to face and telephone interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes each. In most cases they were taped and transcribed. For the purposes of this paper, the transcripts and notes were then analysed for common themes (Miles & Huberman, 2003) relating to international students.

Some limitations of the research method should be noted. The political controversies surrounding overseas students during the life of the research project may have affected the willingness of relevant RTOs to take part in the study. The use of recommendation for interviewees and case studies may affect the generalisability of the results. RTOs may have been selective in the teachers, students and partnering enterprises presented for interview. It should also be noted that the primary focus of the project was not on international students. Pedagogy for international students established itself early in the project as an additional area of inquiry for the project, but was not the primary focus for the final analysis of the project data.

## **Findings and discussion**

The following themes relating to international students emerged from the data described above. It should be noted that the case of the TAFE respondents, statements in the discussion generally refer to the departments interviewed rather than the Institute as a whole. Quotations are selected as being typical of comments on the particular issue.

### Nature of the students

In the RTOs researched via telephone interview, overseas students were drawn from a wide range of countries; some RTOs were more diverse than others in terms of countries of origin, with RTO 4 in particular reporting a very diverse international student group. The major groupings were Chinese, Indian and Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Korean, but a fair number of North American and European students were also enrolled. Students were on the whole young adults. The two TAFE Institutes had large concentrations of overseas students in the departments interviewed; and their overseas cohorts had grown rapidly. They had very few overseas students in other departments. RTOs 1 and 3, both commercial, had been working with overseas students who were their major client base, for some time; RTO 3 was currently expanding its domestic market, having recently moved into new premises which provided more space. RTO 2 had begun operating every evening in the hospitality section to accommodate the overseas students in the available space. RTO 4 was about to move into offshore partnership arrangements, having 'got the confidence (from) delivering to international students (on-shore)' as a manager stated. In the case study RTOs, 5 and 6, international students formed an important part of their full-time student population (for example forming 40% of students enrolled in Diploma and higher qualifications at RTO 6) and were primarily from Asian countries.

### Nature of the curriculum

In most cases students were studying at Certificate III moving up to Diploma level although at RTO 1 some were enrolled up to Advanced Diploma level. The focus of all of the RTOs in terms of their perceived strength was on their links with industry. They were focused on producing graduates who were able to meet the needs of industry and find employment. While delivery was institutionally-based, there were hairdressing salons open to the public and training restaurants. At RTO 1, each program had an industry reference group that met two or three times a year. Teaching delivery methods and assessment were discussed at these meetings and the focus was on making the predominantly classroom-based delivery and assessment 'real'. Many

teachers/trainers in each of the RTOs still worked in industry, and industry associations were invited in to the RTOs to run professional development sessions and/or teachers and trainers were encouraged to attend industry events.

There were very structured systems in place in the two private RTOs to maintain the quality of training and assessment. Training materials were detailed, prescriptive and explicit; at RTO 1, teaching teams met frequently each teaching term. In RTO 5, teachers' performance was monitored to ensure quality was maintained. The public RTOs tended not to be so prescriptive in their quality systems except RTO 4 which had adopted licensed hairdressing training materials that required them to undertake certain quality processes to be allowed to deliver them. However all of the public providers offered professional development in cross-cultural issues. One public provider (a manager) said that only experienced teachers were allowed to teach international students

*.. because they can identify if they're struggling or not, compared to a new teacher who we would tend to (give) our Cert II groups or things like that.*

### Challenges associated with teaching international students

The main additional need of the international students in all cases was perceived to be the language barrier. A teacher in RTO 5 said this was the major issue he dealt with in his teaching. The limited language skills of some students meant that teachers needed to be careful to use only the level of complexity of language necessary to teach and assess the relevant skills. This was said by one interviewee (a manager) to be good competency-based teaching practice anyway, with 'reasonable adjustment' in assessment. One RTO had a 'speak in English only' rule at college, although it was noted that it was not always strictly enforced. RTO 4 reported that the proprietary training materials were available in a range of languages and that although English was the teaching language, students could view the resources in their native languages to reinforce their learning. As one interviewee (a manager) said of her teachers:

*yes look I think they just realise that they've just got to have a little bit more time and patience for internationals compared to - sometimes the local students catch on a bit quicker.*

Allied to, but separate from, language problems, was the general propensity of overseas students from Asian cultures particularly to be relatively unparticipative in class. They were reported to prefer rote learning and theory based learning. This was generally addressed by two strategies: by modelling participative behaviour and deliberately engaging the overseas students in teacher-student dialogue; and by 'forcing' overseas students to mix with Australian students in class. Teachers said that overseas students were generally very interested in helping out with extra-curricular activities such as open days or industry forums. The Australian students interviewed in RTOs 5 and 6 reported that they enjoyed working with the overseas students and had welcomed the chance to expand their friendship groups in this way. A domestic student from RTO 6 said, for example:

*You just get to learn about other cultures and also how they work in their work environments and yeah, it's good learning about their cultures. And also you become friends with them it's good. Like a lot of my friends are from lots of different countries so it's really nice.*

Considering that the hospitality industry involves frequent contact with people from different countries, it could certainly be seen as a major advantage for all students, domestic and international alike, to mix with people from other cultures during their training.

### Special curricular and pedagogical arrangements

Each RTO had additional support staff available to help students with their language and it was noted in all cases that having staff with a multicultural background or that had travelled widely helped to ensure that students felt at home. As one teacher said,

*Somebody that has come from overseas and has come to Australia can understand the alienness of it ... particularly if they're from a non-English speaking background.*

At RTO 3, the Principal Education Officer travelled widely in Asia, and had a high profile in hairdressing circles for example in Korea, which was viewed favourably by the students. This interviewee in particular noted that, in the industry, Asian styles were considered more *avant garde* than Western styles, and that she employed casual teachers from Asian countries to teach the students particular styling techniques. In RTO 5, many teachers had wide experience in different countries. The RTOs provided additional services that were open to all but particularly appreciated by overseas students; for example RTO 2 provided a 'common room' that provided facilities such as quiet reading spaces, a television, and computers, which domestic students were likely to have in their own homes. It was noted that some students had given up a great deal to attend an RTO in Australia; an example was given of one student who had left a small child in her home country. Pastoral care arrangements such as assistance in finding accommodation were commonplace, as was the provision of English language conversation classes.

An important element of teachers' work was to ensure that students had a good understanding of the cultural requirements of Australian workplaces. It was reported that students sometimes had difficulty in accessing part-time work in the appropriate industry, partly because of language barriers and more recently due to the economic recession, and partly because small businesses were found not always to be able or willing to devote time to assisting overseas students settle into a workplace. Hence there was a need for in-house enterprises such as were found in most of the RTOs concerned, including in particular RTO 6. In most cases, RTOs also employed a work placement officer to help students find work in the appropriate industry, At RTO 4, in a regional city, no difficulty was experienced in finding hairdressing placements; this was ascribed both to the deep and longstanding industry networks of the teaching staff and to the lack of competition from other providers for the places. RTO 2 had developed an arrangement with a major events venue both so that the venue's facilities could be used for teaching delivery; RTO 5 had a similar arrangement with some major hotels. In the former case, students also accessed casual work at the venue.

In the end, despite the special needs of overseas students, good teachers made good teachers of overseas students. As the interviewee (a manager) in RTO 4 said, when asked to think about a teacher who was good with overseas students:

*There's one teacher I can think of who is just a very genuine, patient, nurturing, but sort of also a little bit of no nonsense as well... we have in our institute an*

*award for an international student across the institute each year. We have in our institute an award for an international student across the institute each year. So any of our international students can be nominated for that. She's always very proactive and she knows students... Whereas someone might have a class and know two or three students, she would know all of them and remember them.*

As this interviewee (a manager) put it, the secret was 'not treating them differently, but not treating them the same' – i.e. providing the same level of extra and individualised support for all students. It was considered to be important to treat overseas students with trust, rather than assuming that some were more focused on immigration than on their studies. However as one interviewee (a manager) said, an immigration focus was not a crime.

*A lot of students are here (for) permanent residency but that's perhaps not a bad thing.*

While it was reported that most students went on to work in the industry, there was some indication that future teachers were also being trained. One RTO manager said one of her international students, after a period in the industry, now worked as a hairdressing teacher; an overseas student from RTO 5 said that his eventual goal was to become a chef teacher.

#### What works well?

The RTOs that were visited and interviewed appeared to have a very strong team spirit and a professional development orientation among their teachers of overseas students. One interviewee (a department manager) said 'we are trying to learn the whole time' and another said 'we definitely really, really push the PD.' The latter regularly sent her teachers interstate to visit other RTOs, both public and private; travelling interstate removed the competition issue from the visits.

The findings about issues needing to be addressed with international students did not differ markedly from the literature. However considering that the literature is primarily situated in higher education and not VET, it is not surprising that the research uncovered an additional strand of challenges, which were associated with finding work, finding work placements, and preparing students for the demands of eventual full-time work in Australian workplaces.

In summary the observed and suggested strategies for dealing effectively with international students can be described as follows.

Teachers can:

- Show that they value different cultures.
- Use visual teaching as much as possible where students' English skills are initially poor.
- Mix international with local students in group activities.
- Ask the students easy questions – definitely do not avoid them in questioning.
- Be approachable and friendly.
- Ensure that assessment tasks do not include English language requirements over and above the appropriate level.

- Ensure that domestic students are not disadvantaged while attending to international students.

RTOs can:

- Provide English language support.
- Forge and maintain good relationships with local employers to ensure the maximum availability of placements and part-time work.
- Provide a substitute for paid work for the students where necessary.
- Ensure that students understand the cultural norms of the industry as well as developing the necessary skills.
- Provide pastoral support services.
- Provide very structured teaching materials.
- Focus on professional development in all areas.
- Evaluate teachers'/trainers' performance with relation to their effectiveness with international students.

It was suggested by one respondent that a network for teachers dealing with international students for the first time would be valuable. This could be facilitated by a group of RTOs or by the Skills Council.

## **Conclusion**

The pedagogical, curricular and pastoral 'additions' provided for international students in the RTOs that were researched represented a considerable investment in the success of the students. A 2007 survey of international graduates from Australian VET and higher education courses (Australian Education International, 2008: 3) indicated that 67% of international VET graduates were working, either full-time or part-time, and 26% undertaking further study; of those working, 84% were working in Australia, compared with 69% of international higher education graduates. The retention rate into the Australian economy and society from VET programs was therefore high. The survey also showed that 88% of these graduates were satisfied with their programs of study and would recommend studying in Australia to their family and friends (AEI, 2008: 4). 78% had applied for, or intended to apply for, permanent residency status in Australia. With the levels of support and high quality training noted in the research reported in this paper, it is likely that these students look favourably on their Australian experience, integrate well, and are disposed to stay in the country and in the industry to which they have been introduced. The providers have made a long-term commitment to the success of their programs with international students, and their investment is currently threatened by attempts to undermine the VET industry in this area of its operations.

The paper adds to the available literature in describing some practical strategies for teaching international students that managers, teachers and students report as successful. In addition it discusses issues associated with work placements, rarely addressed in scholarly VET (as opposed to school of higher education) literature even for domestic students, and provides examples of effective strategies. Finally it proposes the formation of a network for VET teachers of international students.

The research in this paper is based on visits to, and telephone conversations with, only a small proportion of RTOs delivering training to overseas students. Some RTOs may

provide less than perfect service to their international students and some students may be less diligent in their application to their qualifications. However the same criticisms could be leveled at any education provider teaching any cohort of students, yet we do not see suggestions that other sections of the education industry should be closed down or subject to draconian regulation, because a few providers are said to be of low quality or because some students lack motivation. More empirical research is urgently needed to inform public debate so that policy decisions are based on evidence of teaching and learning quality and not prejudice.

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## **Appendix 1. Case study interview protocol for teacher/trainer**

1. What is your role within the RTO? Please briefly describe your working experience before taking on your role. Do you work full-time/part-time, exclusively in teaching or other duties etc?
2. Please describe the nature of your teaching/training/assessing in Service Skills qualifications (eg on-site at the RTO/mainly work-place based etc.) Do you undertake any delivery of non-qualification-based training in Service Skills, and if so, please describe it?
3. Please describe briefly the nature of the Service Skills learners that you teach/assess– eg age, domestic/international, individually enrolled/ corporate business.
4. What do you think are the most satisfying things about teaching for the service industries? and the most challenging or frustrating things about the role?
5. What do you consider to be best practice delivery and assessment for these industries?
6. What's more important for teachers and trainers -industry skills & knowledge or education skills & knowledge? (*use the scale used in survey - attached*)
7. What do you think your RTO does well in terms of teaching/training for the service industries? How did the RTO achieve this?

8. What is your view of the desired nature of VET practitioners delivering training for the service industries?
9. What views are passed onto you by corporate clients or by students/learners about the desired nature of VET practitioners delivering training for the service industries?
10. Please describe some staff development programs that you have undertaken that relate to teaching/training/assessing in the Service Skills industry area. Who provided these programs? What made you decide to undertake them?
11. What are the expectations of your RTO in relation to industry currency for Service Skills teachers? Are there formally-expressed requirements or programs? Are more informal means undertaken by yourself or by other teachers?
12. In what other ways have you learned to be a good teacher/trainer/assessor for the service industries?
13. What distinguishes a good teacher for the Service Industries?
14. In an ideal situation, what would you say needs to happen to improve the skills and knowledge of teachers/trainers delivering training for the Service Industries– in your company, in RTOs more generally ? What might assist or impede this?