Interpretations of Comparability and Equivalence around Assessment: Views of Academic Staff in Transnational Education

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Abstract

This paper presents research from an Australian Learning and Teaching Council priority project which focuses on the high stakes activity of assessment in transnational programs. The paper specifically deals with interpretations of Australian and transnational partner academic staff around Australian Federal Government protocols relating to 'equivalence' or 'comparability' of Australian degrees delivered in the transnational setting. Questionnaire and interview data show that whilst the idea of maintaining standards in subjects and academic programs is a key concern, academic staff face complex and challenging issues such as the inclusion of localised content in transnational teaching and assessment, different levels of language proficiency of students and related implications for developing and marking assessment. Our research suggests that fostering of relationships and dialogic interaction between the Australian and TNE partner staff in regard to assessment and, more broadly, academic standards could ameliorate the risk to the quality of TNE programs and heighten Australia's reputation as an international education provider.

Introduction

Transnational Education (TNE) processes and practices are starkly under-represented in the literature on the internationalisation of higher education. The majority of the limited entries are "informal, anecdotal papers" outlining the experiences of Australian teaching staff in the TNE setting (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007, p.47). It is not surprising that Australian Education International (AEI) and the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) call for more research to evaluate and illustrate "good practice" (IEAA, 2006, p.19). This is particularly important given the prediction that TNE programs are likely to become more niche-focused activities relying on the quality of their educational offerings to attract discerning students who will have far greater choice of education providers (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007, pp.152–153), and not only from Australia.

This paper resonates strongly with the 2010 Australian Quality Forum (AuQF) theme of academic standards by focusing on assessment-related perspectives in the international dimension of TNE. It draws on research outcomes from an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) priority project titled 'Moderation for Fair Assessment in Transnational Learning and Teaching'. Questionnaire and interview data from Australian and TNE partner academic staff are analysed to explore interpretations of 'comparability' and 'equivalence' in the high-stakes area of student assessment. The findings indicate that whilst academic standards and 'big picture' outcomes at the program level are highly valued by all staff, there is a range of interpretations on how these should be achieved.

Comparability and Equivalence in Transnational Education

The principle promoted to Australian universities to ensure quality and sustainability in the economically and educationally significant TNE market is one of 'comparability' or 'equivalence' between what happens in Australian-based programs and their TNE delivery. The 'National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes' (MCEETYA, 2000) outlines an expectation of 'equivalent' standards for the TNE operations of Australian universities which operate under their own name overseas, and 'comparable' standards when operating offshore through a TNE partner organisation. There is little evidence, however, of these terms having been unpacked to any significant extent by stakeholders to ascertain their precise implications for the TNE setting. This project has found that the waters are further muddied by related terms such as consistency, equity, equality, identicalness, mirroring, sameness and similarity which are frequently used in the field.

The Research Framework

The ethics-approved ALTC project used an online questionnaire and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to gather data. This mixed methods approach draws on the strengths of both methods whilst also addressing the limitations of each. As put by Zeller (1997), "it is more difficult to be misled by the results that triangulate multiple techniques ... than it is to be misled by a single technique which suffers from inherent weaknesses" (p.828). Overall, this maximises the degree to which the research outcomes reflect real world phenomena. All data generating instruments were pre-tested, then pilot-tested with a small sample of people who shared some characteristics of the target groups. In this paper, the sample is composed of Australian and TNE partner academic staff of the three Australian universities involved in the project (University of South Australia, Curtin University of Technology and Southern Cross University.) Note, however, that the online questionnaire was also distributed Australia-wide via ALTC networks to academic staff. The research data were collected both in Australia and overseas between February and November 2009.

Results and Discussion

Although the data from the online questionnaire and interviews were analysed independently, the emergent results are complementary to each other. The questionnaire data provide a general overview of how 'comparability' and 'equivalence' are interpreted by academic staff. The interview data afford an opportunity to explore this in greater depth.

Questionnaire Data

The online questionnaire data for the question, "What do you understand by the terms 'comparability' and 'equivalence' in the specific context of TNE assessment?" were analysed using SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys (v.3). The analysis drew on 87 useful responses from 65 Australian and 22 TNE partner staff and is based on words and concepts evident in the data. Eleven categories were identified, with each response commonly linked to more than one category. A category web is presented in Figure 1 which illustrates the number of respondents (rounded number) whose responses were coded to a particular category (by the size of the circle) as well as the relative number of times that these responses were also coded to another category (by the thickness of the line).
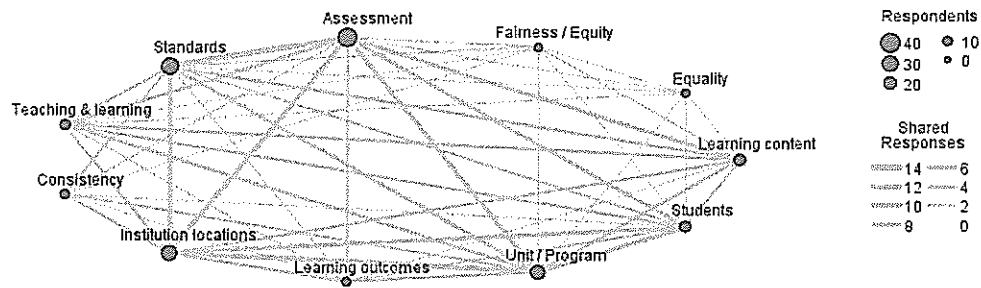
Figure 1: Category Web for Online Questionnaire Response for 'Comparability' and 'Equivalence'

About a quarter of respondents (21) drew a distinction between the terms 'comparability 'and 'equivalence' in relation to TNE assessment. 'Comparability' was generally used to signify similarity (e.g. "It is not of equal standard but is not far off") whereas equivalence was used to indicate equality or sameness (e.g. "It is of same standard".) The remainder did not specifically draw a distinction but instead elaborated the concepts with examples. The majority of respondents explained the terms in relation to assurance of equal, similar or consistent programs, assessments, student experiences or learning outcomes between the Australian and TNE partner institutions. Standards of assessment in relation to programs or units at different locations formed the most common type of response (e.g. "That assessments will be the same, and that the skills/understanding that are being assessed will be to the same standard across cohorts." Standards in relation to teaching, student learning and learning outcomes were also common (e.g. "Educational, certification and quality standards and policies between parent university and TNE centres teaching similar programs should be of similar level and there shouldn't be any marked difference between the two." A small proportion of respondents (10%) indicated no understanding of the two terms in relation to TNE assessment.

Interview Data

Eighty five interviewees were specifically asked about their understandings of 'comparability' and 'equivalence' in relation to TNE assessment. Of interest, relevant data about these themes also emerged from the interview transcripts as a whole and this indicates that they are woven into the fabric of TNE operations on a number of levels. The following sub-themes of 'comparability' and 'equivalence' emerged from coding the interview transcriptions using NVivo8 qualitative data analysis software:

- **Standards** (meaning wherever the TNE program is completed it must ultimately have the same program level outcomes as the related Australian program)
- **Identical characteristics** (meaning content and assessment in the TNE program should be a mirror image of the content and assessment in the related Australian program)
- **Same overall outcomes but incorporating** *and* **assessing local content** (as per 'Standards' above but arguing that the same subject and program level outcomes can be achieved, for example, through contextualising content to the TNE location and embedding this into the TNE assessment)
- **Language issues** (assessment and marking to accommodate perceived challenges TNE students have with using English language in academic contexts)

Standards

This sub-theme is concerned with the idea that regardless of whether a particular Australian degree is offered in Australia or in a TNE location, graduates from any one program should be conversant with the same sorts of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are central to what the degree seeks as educational and professional outcomes. The following quote from a TNE partner academic demonstrates this 'big picture' conceptualisation of 'comparability' and 'equivalence':

> "You are trading on the fact that they have an Australian university degree. They should be equal to an Australian graduate. If an international student happens to work in Australia with a degree from (an Australian TNE program) and they are illiterate they are a blot on the university."

This outcomes-based view is a fundamental expectation of key stakeholders. As put by an Australian academic, "The degree is worth the same no matter where students study it." It begs the question, however, of exactly how this is structured and achieved and this is a foundational quality assurance concern. A TNE partner academic gives cause to step back and think about the complexities associated with this:

> "I think this is a long debatable issue...there is always concern about how we can compare standards, how can we be sure they are having the same educational experience (as in Australia)."

Another TNE partner academic outlines the building block-type approach of constructing 'big picture' outcomes when they suggest that whatever it takes for a student to be awarded a distinction grade in any particular subject in Australia should be the same as what it takes to be awarded a distinction grade in the TNE offering of that subject. This infers that both Australian and TNE partner academics need to have sufficient communication around assessment standards to be 'on the same page' (particularly where TNE partner staff mark assessment.) The research carried out in this project indicates that whilst this is desirable, it may not always be the case, especially in instances where there is reasonably rapid turnover of both Australian and TNE academic staff and many new staff come on board with little comprehensive induction to role and a lack of ongoing professional development opportunities.

Identical characteristics

For some staff, achieving the 'big picture' outcomes discussed above is a matter of ensuring that the assessment items and associated questions in the TNE location are exactly the same as those in the Australian-based subjects. One TNE academic reports, "We are using the same assignments so that makes life a little bit easier...identical, yes. It makes life so much easier." Another TNE academic echoes this by saying, "The assessment should be identical. Therefore the degree awarded is the same wherever the student is. This is an international business course." A colleague in the same partner institution indicates clearly that from their point of view, "There should be no change in assessment." Consider, for instance, a subject with a focus on the Australian tax system. Ostensibly, this would push all students irrespective of location into identical assessment. Some staff believe that having identical assessment is easier in 'quantitative' disciplines whose subjects seek answers to questions that are expressed mathematically rather than discursively. All students in all locations would be responding to 'closed' assessment questions which on the face of it might circumvent communication in English. The interview data also suggests that many academics feel as if this type of assessment leaves little margin for 'subjective' error when being marked by academic staff.

Same overall outcomes but incorporating and assessing local content

Despite the very clear statements around the importance of identical assessment across locations, the interview data is replete with the sentiment that 'big picture' outcomes at the degree level can (and in many cases should) be achieved in ways other than having identical assessment. Note that this is not so much a call, for example, for an essay in the Australian-based subject to be replaced by a multiple choice question in the TNE location. It is mostly about contextualising curriculum content to reflect the TNE location and then assessing this using the particular designated assessment instrument that remains the same across all locations, for example, an exam or a report. The call for contextualisation is, in the main, driven by TNE partner academics but supported in principle and practice by a number of Australian academic staff, particularly those who have developed strong relationships with TNE partner academics and who have come to value their experience and knowledge. For example, an Australian academic indicates that, "Well basically it's got to be the same...what we are trying to measure is the same, an

educational outcome...from past experience it is possible to do the same thing with...different assignments." A TNE partner academic echoes this sentiment:

> "Comparability – not 100% similar assignments done here and there (in Australia), but comparable in the sense that same lecture notes, the same guidelines, same text books, content more or less similar and consistent."

This is a strongly held opinion of many TNE partner academics who were interviewed. They believe that whilst it is important for students to be exposed to international content there is definitely a place for local content in the TNE programs which should then be embedded in assessment. Another TNE partner academic stresses that, "Assessment should be the same for everyone. The principles remain the same however it should be acceptable to analyse (the TNE location's country) balance of payments." They continue by suggesting that the TNE program, "must allow for local conditions and context. Curriculum, assignments and marking criteria need adaptation."

Whilst the complexities around this level of contextualisation are apparent, a TNE partner academic makes an important point about the teaching and assessment of the TNE location content; "In a few (subjects) ... we have freedom to set the local scene or local cases as long as the learning outcomes are the same." This implies a level of dialogue and a trusting relationship between the Australian and TNE partner academics. It also brings into view the idea of 'locus of control'; about who makes decisions on the detail associated with curriculum development and assessment.

Language issues

Achievement of 'big picture' program outcomes implies students will have demonstrated sufficient proficiency in the language of instruction which in the case of most Australian TNE programs is English. One Australian academic says, "I would say that students there (TNE location) are the same as here (Australia). The key difference was English. It's worse there." Whilst a number of Australian academics are cognisant of the challenges that many TNE students face as English as an Additional Language (EAL) speakers, the interview data show that the TNE partner academics regularly engage with this topic. The latter often relate English language proficiency to an argument for adjusting expectations around language and at least some localisation of content in the belief that this will be more readily understood to their students than, for example, Australian-focused content. One TNE partner academic says that achieving the same academic standard in TNE "is difficult because of the gap in language levels. It should be the same or equivalent in terms of language. It is applying the Australian criteria to (TNE) students but there needs to be some adjustment in terms of language level and curriculum." Adjustments around language in part relate to the observation made by some TNE partner academics about what to reward when marking assessments:

> "The main problems are language, not the conceptual understanding. There seems to be an overemphasis on language in the marking but meaning should be more important than expression. If Australian students were learning programs in (another language), how would you judge their work? Maybe there is a different standard needed for (TNE) students studying this Australian degree."

Another TNE partner academic provides a related and equally fundamental and legitimate perspective on the place of language in TNE which speaks to complex issues around curriculum planning in terms of embedding academic literacies:

> "I think students in the (subject), they may not have the expectation that they need to write academic writing and then if they're expected to write academic writing, there should be like a certain kind of training...I saw how like the markers do the markings. And then I think they actually are following the criteria for a good piece of academic writing and then the students can't understand at all. And then I think

that's one of the difficult parts for students...if you expect the student to write academic writing, maybe some course is needed."

There do not appear to be clear-cut solutions to the language-related matters outlined above. Interestingly, similar issues are presently being played out around English language proficiency and academic literacies in Australia *for both Australian and international students*. It needs to be asked how these ruminations are being pushed out to the TNE setting and, indeed, what lessons from the TNE setting might be instructive for what is happening in Australia.

Conclusion

Whilst the questionnaire and interview data position the idea of standards at the forefront of interpretations of 'comparability' and 'equivalence' in TNE assessment, the more this is unpacked through individual experiences and concerns of academic staff, the more complex and challenging it becomes to locate shared understandings. Whilst variation in interpretations of 'comparability' and 'equivalence' is to be expected, the fostering of relationships and dialogic interaction between the Australian and TNE partner staff in regard to assessment and, more broadly, academic standards could ameliorate the risk to the quality of TNE programs and heighten Australia's reputation as an international education provider.

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Quality Assurance with Three "Masters"

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Abstract

Navitas is a public company listed on the Australian Securities Exchange, which owns a network of pathway colleges both within Australia and overseas. Each college partners with a public university to offer a range of higher education programs across a range of disciplines, successful completion of which enables graduates to articulate to the partner university with advanced standing. By their very nature, Navitas pathway colleges are characterised by wide ranging diversity within the student body. Given this, while programs draw almost exclusively on curriculum from the partner university's relevant undergraduate degree, the delivery model is significantly different. Students undertake studies within a teaching and learning environment adapted for their unique and varied needs. Since the establishment of the first pathway college some 16 years ago, the concept has proved very successful providing opportunities to literally thousands of students to achieve a degree.

The challenges in managing quality assurance have, however, increased over time. Drivers are multiple, but include:

- *the increasing rigour of the Australian higher education quality framework in which the pathway colleges operate;*
- *the stringent nature of the Australian Securities Exchange requirements for a public company; and*
- *the partner university's role in ensuring parity of standards between it and the pathway college.*

A considerable amount of time has recently been invested in reviewing quality assurance frameworks within Navitas and its pathway colleges, with particular regard to governance, clearly articulated delegations, strategic planning and performance measures with the aim of meeting all requirements within a single model.

Overview of Navitas

Navitas has a network of pathway colleges in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Africa, Asia and more recently, the USA. Each pathway college partners with a public university to provide a series of higher education programs across a range of disciplines. The majority of colleges are located on the partner university's campus.

By their very nature, Navitas pathway colleges are characterised by wide ranging diversity within the student body. Students are distinguished not only by their varying cultural origins, but also in a number of different ways which may include one or more of the following:

- first language;
- approach to learning;
- expectations;
- academic achievements/qualifications;

- goals; and
- motivation.

Given this, while programs draw almost exclusively on curriculum from the university partner's relevant undergraduate degree, the delivery model is significantly different. Students undertake studies within a teaching and learning environment adapted for their unique and varied needs and which better prepares them for success in the university environment.

Graduates exit with higher education awards (Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree) and are afforded advanced standing into a university Bachelor degree with up to two years credit. Some colleges also offer postgraduate qualifying programs.
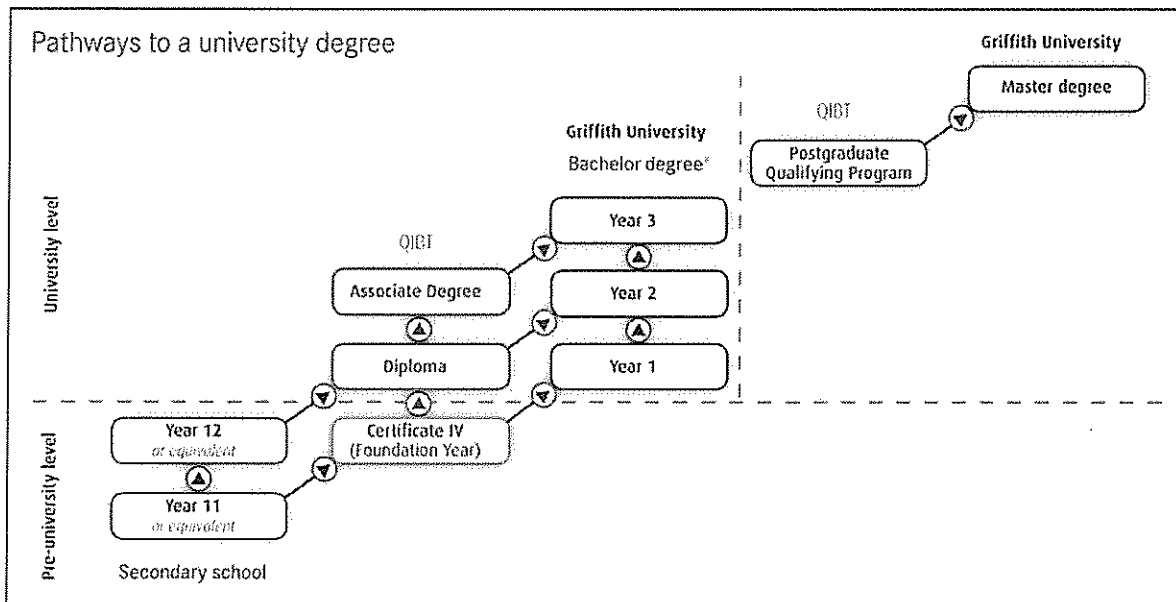

Figure 1: Navitas pathway model (QIBT example)

While Navitas is the parent company, it is not an education provider. Rather, each of the colleges is the education provider and within Australia, each is a non self-accrediting institution (NSAI), a higher education provider (HEP) and a registered training organisation (RTO).

Challenges of the Navitas Pathway Model

Navitas origins hark back some 16 years and the pathway concept has proved extremely successful since its inception. It has provided opportunities for literally thousands of students ineligible for direct university entry, to successfully complete awards at both the Navitas college and the partner university.

Managing quality assurance (QA) across multiple colleges within Australia and overseas, has, however, become more challenging over time.

This has been driven by several factors within Australia, not the least of which has been the increasing rigour of the non self-accrediting institution QA environment since its relative infancy some years ago. At that time, state-based legislation and guidelines dictated requirements for institution registration and course accreditation. Requirements differed across states, even though all guidelines were informed by

National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes (National Protocols) approved by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2000.

In 2007, MCEETYA approved revisions to the National Protocols and the *National Guidelines (relating to National Protocols A and B) for the registration of non self-accrediting higher education institutions and the accreditation of their course/s* (National Guidelines).

While the greater level of consistency across different states and territories within Australia was an important step forward, the heightened rigour of the new National Guidelines added complexities to institution registration and program accreditation.

It would be remiss at this point not to mention the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) as another key element of the quality assurance framework which underpins awards within the school, vocational and higher education sectors within Australia.

An additional complexity within Navitas pathway colleges, is the stringent nature of the regulatory framework in which a publicly listed company (and hence, its subsidiaries) is required to operate. This rigour also feeds into each of the pathway colleges.

Finally, while the very strength of the model is the partner university's role in ensuring parity of standards between it and the pathway college, this creates a third QA framework to which each college must respond.

Exacerbating this is the challenge of QA associated with the Certificate IV in University Foundation Studies Program offered by each College. This program is termed a VET program under the Australian Qualifications Framework, the regulatory framework for which essentially centres around competency based modules and assessment – none of which applies to an academic Foundation Program such as that offered by the pathway colleges.

Setting aside the Foundation Program challenges, Navitas and its pathway colleges invested considerable time and resources in 2009 to reviewing quality assurance frameworks, with particular regard to governance, clearly articulated delegations, strategic planning and performance measures.

The aim was to meet the requirements of a public listed company, those for an NSAI and those of the partner university within a single model.

Aligning NSAI and Public Company Requirements

Corporate and Academic Governance

The National Guidelines charge NSAI governing bodies, appropriately, with significant responsibilities relating to governance. This role has been undertaken to date by each college Board of Directors, with membership typically comprising a sole director and a company secretary.

The Australian Securities Exchange (ASX), however, requires the Boards of listed public companies to be responsible for governance and as a result, since listing in 2004, it is the Navitas Board of Directors (the Board) which is in effect the governing body for both Navitas Limited and its subsidiary companies – including the pathway colleges.

This shift of responsibilities needed to be reflected in the college governance structures and hence, satisfy both the ASX requirements and those of an NSAI.

To this end, a process was undertaken to ensure the Board, which already met ASX requirements, would meet those of a higher education institution, with the following being undertaken:

- *Membership expertise*:

    This needed no adjustment as the requirements for a listed company and an NSAI overlap. The Board Charter already articulated a need to have representation from: accounting, finance, business, higher education, legal and CEO-level experience;

- *Responsibility for oversight of college activities*:

    The only amendment to an already detailed Charter articulating the Board's responsibilities and function was to include specific reference to oversight of educational outcomes within the Group, thus meeting NSAI requirements.

    To this end, academic outcomes of individual colleges are now reported annually to the Navitas Board in a University Programs Division (UPD) Teaching and Learning Report.

- *Reporting lines / delegations*:

    Minor adjustments were made to the Navitas delegations policies to better articulate responsibilities in relation to conferral of academic awards and academic governance.

    These delegations then informed locally developed college policies to ensure clarity of decision making for both corporate and academic governance, as well as authority limits, from the Board, via the Executive General Manager of the Navitas University Programs Division (EGM, UPD), down to a "local" level within colleges.

- *College governance structures*:

    Each pathway college reviewed and revised its governance structure to better articulate the role of the Board within each as the governing body.

    Interestingly, approval for such a change to college registration has, to date, met with different outcomes across different states – some approving the Navitas Board as the governing body and others rejecting this revision.

    Even so, while there are local nuances informed by jurisdictional regulatory requirements or the partner university, the following governance structure is now typical of that within each Australian pathway college: