

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.

Keywords: Transnational Education, Comparability and Equivalence, Transnational Assessment

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

4.1 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).

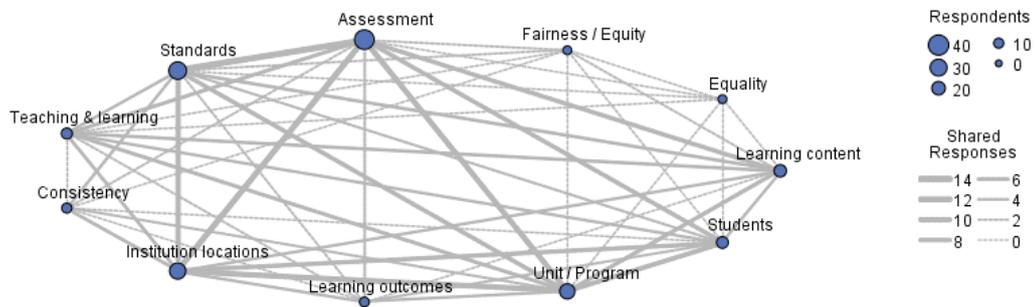


Figure 1: Category Web for Online Questionnaire Response for ‘Comparability’ and ‘Equivalence’

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.

4.2 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)

4.2.1 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.

4.2.2 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.

4.2.3 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.

4.2.4 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.

5. 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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