Good Practice in Offshore Delivery: A summary of a guide for Australian providers (DEEWR)

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This resource is a summary of the *Good Practice in Offshore Delivery: A guide for Australian providers* prepared for the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (International Education Association of Australia, 2008).

Transnational education is also known as offshore education and can be defined as “the study of programs leading to an Australian qualification for credit in countries other than Australia”.

Seven topics relevant to transnational education (TNE) practitioners have been identified. Advice is provided to give the *Guide* a comprehensive, useful and practical focus.

1. **Introduction to Australian transnational education**

The shift from aid to trade in an education context was influenced by the Hawke Government in the early 1980s. Recommendations of the Jackson and the Goldring reports in the mid-1980s enabled tertiary institutions to recruit international students and charge fees, a change from *education as aid*, to *education as trade*.

Although, commercial return is one goal, there are other motivations, including the desire for increased cultural understanding between Australia and other countries, internationalisation of the curriculum and the challenge of working in cross-cultural environments. Altruism in the form of contributions to national capacity-building or widening access to education in the host country is also an important motivation. Also, research collaboration, shared scholarship and the demand for education and training in new fields of practice influence the decision to engage in offshore activity. See page 3.

There are several models: full delivery, articulation, franchising, branch campus and distance learning. The definition is contentious with the OECD including collaborative provision, branch campuses and distance learning, but excluding more traditional study abroad or student exchange, where the student moves across borders. However, TQS defines ‘transnational education may encompass the study of programs leading to an Australian qualification for credit in countries other than Australia, and which requires students to be physically present in a specific location’. In other words, the TQS definition excludes distance education that doesn’t require a face-to-face component. See page 11.

The Australian Government’s Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) contributes to sustainability of the sector by setting a framework for Australian providers delivering or planning to deliver their courses offshore. Key principles include: quality assurance; and equivalence in standard of delivery and outcomes of courses within Australia and transnationally. Key elements of the TQS include the AusLIST which is a useful encouragement to good practice though not regulatory (Australian government, 2013).
2. Equivalence and comparability

‘Equivalence’ is discussed as it relates to: the nationally recognised quality assurance arrangements; processes related to delivery and delivery standards; and course outcomes. It provides the foundation for minimum standards for effective transnational delivery. Equivalence is effective for consumer protection as it relates to program purpose, evaluation, teaching spaces, facilities, online resources, student support and the educational environment. This notion of equivalence has utility for education as a traded service and for consumer protection.

- Higher education has a comprehensive set of quality assurance provisions that relate to transnational education, which includes:
  - The National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, recently revised and agreed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA 2007);
  - The four sets of National Guidelines for Higher Education Approval Processes (2007), which support implementation of the National Protocols;
  - The Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee publication, *Provision of education to international students: Code of practice and guidelines for Australian universities* (2005); and
  - The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

The specific criteria of equivalence are set out in each set of the National Guidelines for Higher Education Approval Processes. For example:

- External scrutiny or accreditation and appropriate academic input provide assurance that the standard of the course is comparable with Australian universities;
- The course content is comparable in requirements to courses at the same level in a similar field at Australian universities;
- Delivery approaches for the course are designed to maximise students’ achievement of the objectives for the course;
- Assessment tasks are appropriately designed to measure intended student learning outcomes for the Course;
- Moderation procedures for the course ensure consistent and appropriate standards in assessment; and
- Student learning outcomes for the course are monitored and periodically compared with those of similar courses in Australian universities and the broader higher education sector.
3. Quality management systems

An overwhelming finding of the DEEWR-funded TNE good practice projects was the importance of a well-documented quality management system underpinning the offshore projects. This meant that the provider institutions were able to ensure quality teaching, learning and assessment in their programs. By implication, without a well-documented system that has engaged the provider institution and, if applicable, associate institution staff, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and business processes generally, is at risk. The basic premise of the Transnational Quality Strategy (AEI 2007) is quality of offshore provision.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) guidelines apply to any Australian qualification or award course granted by an Australian education and training provider, regardless of location (onshore or offshore) or mode of delivery. As with any quality management system, the overriding approach should be one of continuous improvement rather than mere compliance.

4. Business management

The dynamics and potential turbulence of TNE associations should not be underestimated. Consequences of failing to establish comprehensive and appropriate business and governance processes, of not following prudent project management, monitoring and review, and of not intervening and resolving difficulties and problems when and if they arise, are dire.

A ‘whole of institution approach’ is critical to successful transnational education delivery.

5. Associate selection and relationship management

Choice of overseas associate is the single most important decision affecting the outcome of a TNE program. The guide provides details of several case studies.

6. Learning, teaching and the student experience

The DEEWR transnational quality projects demonstrate the importance of adopting a scholarly approach to transnational teaching. The investigation, documentation and dissemination of investigations into transnational education help to improve teaching practice and contribute to national attempts generally to continuously improve offshore activities. Practitioners in transnational education should be informed by the research in the field. They should also contribute to that research through conference participation and publications.

All Australian staff working offshore should aim to be flexible and culturally competent. Behaviours that are acceptable in Australia may not translate offshore. Teaching staff should be informed of cultural etiquette and religious protocols.
Programs that are successful in Australia cannot simply be transplanted offshore and be expected to produce similar teaching and learning outcomes. Content, delivery mode, language and assessment of programs should be meaningful, relevant and fair for all students. Curriculum covers the aims and the content of discipline learning. It embodies learning outcomes, teaching methods, student support, competencies, resources, readings, learning activities and assessment tasks.

Whether curriculum that is accredited, developed and planned in Australia is appropriate for offshore delivery is a matter of professional judgement. It is evident that the culture-bound nature of much Australian curriculum could be a concern in the offshore context. References to Australian culture, legislation and workplace practices should be made meaningful with a comparative teaching approach and a balance of local examples.

Internationalisation of the curriculum requires an internationalisation of both what and how we teach. Contextualisation must not be a ‘watering down’ of onshore programs, and curriculum design should be grounded in a positive, rather than deficit, view of students’ cultural and experiential differences. High-quality teaching, learning and assessment resources are a critical component of quality teaching. Offshore resources need to be contextualised through collaboration with local experts. Differences need to be identified and incorporated within the curriculum.

Intercultural communication skills are essential to quality teaching offshore. Moreover, such skills are important for successful team meetings and to enhance general communication strategies between associates and providers. Teachers themselves also need to teach intercultural communication skills to enable students to negotiate cultures successfully. Australian providers need to know how associates and students access and use technology and understand the intercultural aspects of communicating with technologies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

It is relatively easy at a superficial level to add international ‘content’. A greater challenge is for teachers to reconfigure how they teach. Internationalised teaching methods focus on explicit and inclusive teaching practices. All students benefit from teachers who express clear learning outcomes, state what they are doing and why and what they expect from students. Offshore pedagogies should relate to the culture of the student rather than to the teacher. Student-centred teaching offshore will require strategies different from those used teaching onshore. International students and ‘their’ educational traditions are not the problem.

To avoid receiving plagiarised assessment, encourage critical thinking in all activities. Critical thinking should be modelled in lectures and learning activities.

Moderation is the key means by which equivalence between on- and offshore programs can be achieved and demonstrated. Moderation refers to all those processes that assure the quality of assessment. It includes benchmarking with external entities as well as consistency in marking between different cohorts.
Moderation of assessment between associate and provider staff must be documented. Moderation should occur within and between classes, between TNE programs at different locations and between similar on- and offshore programs. The sample number of student work being moderated should be between 10% and 25% of all work submitted, or the square root of the total number of students in the program.

Moderation between the outcomes of onshore and offshore students should identify areas that need to be changed, re-taught, taught differently and/or further supported.

Feedback needs to be clear and informative to have the desired effect of helping students improve their learning. A culture of evaluation and continuous improvement is as essential offshore as onshore.

7. Staffing and professional development

Teaching staff going offshore should meet the same minimal standards of qualifications, industry experience and teaching skills as those teaching in Australia. Choosing the best staff and preparing them well is very important. By sending only specially recruited or experienced culturally aware staff offshore it is possible to avoid the problems that may occur when well-intentioned but ill-prepared staff unwittingly give offence and damage the reputation of the provider.

Professional development should focus on the particular learning needs of practitioners, both native and non-native speakers of English, addressing issues for their students arising from the English as a foreign language environment offshore; the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity of staff; and the need to develop a broad understanding of the structural and institutional context of both the provider and associate institution. Particular reference should be made to differences in common assessment and teaching models on- and offshore.

Without both the appropriate experience, qualifications, comprehensive orientation and induction into the teaching program and the necessary cultural understandings they will need in their work offshore, staff members will be ill-prepared and represent a risk to the credibility of the provider and associate institutions and a threat to the sustainability of the program.

Coordinators or managers working with a cross-cultural workforce need access to PD that enables them to work effectively with the diversity of staff involved in TNE as an absolute starting point.

References
