

Transnationalizing Australian Higher Education Communication and Media Studies Curricula for Offshore Delivery in South East Asia

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Abstract—Many Australian communication and media studies degree programs get delivered in South East Asia by local teaching staff who are instructed to use only the resources provided by host universities and to stringently stick to the curriculum detailed by the universities that own those programs. Standards of quality and excellence in curriculum delivery has habitually been associated with tight control (of curriculum design, teaching materials, assessment) exerted by the program and curriculum owner – which, paradoxically, often ends up becoming a significant contributing factor to the failure or difficulty of achieving quality and excellence in many transnational higher education (TNHE) program delivery situations offshore. Differing practices in quality assurance and in teaching and learning between countries importing TNHE programs and the Australian universities exporting those programs generate a number of pedagogic challenges on each side of TNHE operations. This paper discusses how originally Australia-specific higher education communication and media studies curricula can be transnationalized to enable their more effective and successful delivery and reception in offshore teaching and learning situations. This paper then proceeds to explain how pedagogy, content and assessment can productively be adapted to the specificities of TNHE delivery contexts in order to increase the chances of achieving positive outcomes with regards to teaching, student learning, engagement and experience in communication and media studies programs in particular.

Keywords—*Transnational higher education (TNHE), communication and media studies curricula, Australian universities, Australian higher education, internationalization of higher education, transnationalizing higher education curricula, offshore delivery of higher education, Australian higher education in South East Asia.*

I. WHAT IS TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION (TNHE)?

‘Transnational education’ can be understood here as entailing study programs wherein “the learners are located in a country different from that where the awarding institution is based.”[1]
It

denotes any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be crossed by information about the education, and by staff and/or educational materials.[2]
The conceptualization and application of the term ‘Transnational Higher Education’ (TNHE) will vary according to how the motivations and objectives associated with particular forms of TNHE are perceived

from the perspective of specific partnerships between countries and between institutions. As employed here, the term ‘Transnational Higher Education’ refers explicitly to transnational or cross-border higher education activities characterized by the movement in physical terms of university programs from one country to another.

The further development of globalization, the increasing commodification of higher education, and of the notion of a global knowledge society and economy has resulted in a new range of forms, providers, products, and new, sometimes conflicting, dimensions, views, and elements in the discourse of internationalization

which any discussion of TNHE will inevitably have to fit into.[3]

TNHE has increasingly become integral to the South East Asian higher education landscape since the early 1990s. The number of students enrolled in various Australian TNHE programs in particular that are delivered by private education institutions has been on the rise, especially in Singapore and Malaysia which have become two of the most successful and developed educational hubs in the region. Knight (2014) explains how educational hubs build on and include “many of the recent developments in cross-border higher education” and can indeed be

effective tools for increasing a country’s attractiveness and influence; modernizing higher education policies and practices while increasing access to education; recruiting, training, and retaining a skilled work force; furthering economic development; shifting to a knowledge- and service-based economy; and building strategic and influential alliances.[4]

Common forms of TNHE include, amongst others, distance education, online learning, franchises, articulations, twinning arrangements, and offshore branch campuses.[5] Partnering local private education institutions and offshore branch campuses deliver Australian TNHE programs in South East Asia according to multiple combinations of methods and models that can range from full time face-to-face delivery to various flexible e-learning and part-time options.[6]

Dominant reasons for students to enroll in Australian TNHE

programs offered in South East Asia include confidence in the established high status of Australian research profile and expertise in higher education, in quality assurance processes in place, and in the effectiveness of Australian teaching and learning strategies. Students are motivated to enroll in TNHE programs and “to study at international branch campuses because foreign universities often have a favorable image and reputation in host countries, which enhances students’ employment prospects after graduation”, and because of “national-level pull factors such as shared cultural values, a safe environment, and lower cost of living.”[7] Additionally, as pointed out by Caruana (2016), “students want TNHE programs in order to benefit from wider access to new ideas and methods that will at least enhance their employability and at best enable them to make a real contribution to the current and future societies in which they live.”[8]

According to Heffernan *et al.* (2010), some key characteristics of Australian TNHE are that programs offered offshore:

- lead to an internationally-recognized higher education qualification upon successful completion;
- are under the responsibility of the Australian university that originally developed them, with regards to academic standards;
- are conducted in accordance with a formal agreement between the Australian university and a partnering institution or organization overseas;
- are taught partly and/or wholly offshore (distance education programs are included only when there is a formal agreement that an overseas institution/organization participates in their delivery).[9]

Since few Australian universities actually have branch campuses offshore, the delivery of Australian TNHE programs in South East Asia depends on collaboration and partnership agreements with local private education institutions.

The “provision of study location, marketing, promotion and financial administration is the responsibility of the offshore partner” while the Australian university concerned is “responsible for curriculum, teaching and assessment, and quality assurance.”[10] TNHE operations have to conform to the requirements of academic standards and various forms of quality assurance pursued at the exporting Australian university as well as to fulfill the regulatory conditions set by the host country. ‘Academic standards’, as explained by Sharp (2017),

- “refer to levels of achievement: the depth, breadth and complexity of the knowledge and skills, of which a candidate has demonstrated possession, at the conclusion of his or her program of study”;
- presuppose “the availability of reliable and valid methods of assessment”;
- “are determined by judgments made by members of a particular profession or the academic community of a particular discipline.”[11]

As for quality assurance, its major function is “to give confidence to potential students that the quality of learning opportunities a particular provider offers is sufficient to prepare them for the assessment required for the award they seek.”[12] The *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) oversees all quality assurance aspects of Australian TNHE-related activities offshore and it:

- stipulates guidelines for Australian universities to develop and put in place strategies, policies, and audit

procedures that ensure quality assurance in all programs delivered within Australia and offshore;[13]

- regulates the quality of Australia’s large, diverse and complex higher education sector that comprises both public and private universities, their branches overseas, and other higher education providers.[14]

In the light of the increasingly substantial contribution to the Australian economy of TNHE, ensuring high academic standards and levels of quality assurance for programs delivered offshore becomes a prime objective – which is met as a result of Australian universities implementing a battery of auditing processes, rules, standards and guidelines in the process of controlling and regulating their respective TNHE activities.

TNHE operations are “expected to match the ‘brand identity’ of their parent campuses by recruiting an equivalent student body in terms of selectivity and quality, offering a breadth of programs, and providing student experience that parallels that of the parent campus.”[15] Australian TNHE communication and media studies programs are commonly promoted to prospective students as being dispensed offshore with the same quality – as enjoyed by those enrolled at the home Australian campus – of: curriculum and teaching; access to learning resources and learning experience; marking, grading and assessment. Partnering private education institutions and offshore branch campuses hence have to deliver communication and media studies program curricula in a similar way as they are delivered at the home Australian campus.

In practice however offshore students enrolled in Australian TNHE communication and media studies programs never actually meet face-to-face nor interact with those directly responsible for developing and delivering the same programs at the home campus in Australia. Except for a few TNHE situations involving a ‘flying-in-fly-out’ program and teaching delivery scenario, locally recruited full-time and/or part-time teaching staffs are those who actually do the delivering of Australian TNHE programs offshore. The latter are usually instructed to adhere strictly to curricula and only use resources detailed by the host universities that own those programs in question. The formal aspect of a university’s curriculum is understood here as the “the planned and sequenced program of teaching and learning activities organized around content areas and assessed in various ways.”[16]

With regards to the quality control of TNHE programs, as embedded in processes of moderation and coordination for example, Kerr & Amirthalingam (2012) comment that the

challenge for the course coordinator is to embed the moderation process into course preparation and delivery to ensure both quality assurance and quality control are achieved. The next stage in the continuous improvement of assessment practice in the course will involve enhancing the student learning experience by making the standards against the criteria explicit to the students.[17]

Teaching staff at the Australian home campus who supply resources – such as course outlines and teaching

materials – and develop curricula used in TNHE programs do not directly carry out any teaching. Instead, they act as moderators and course coordinators in a supervisory kind of relationship with full-time and/or part-time local teaching staff doing the actual delivery of the program offshore.

II. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR TRANSNATIONALIZING AUSTRALIAN CURRICULA FOR TNHE DELIVERY

Context, culture and distance often become constraining factors in the complex relationship between the home campus in Australia where communication and media studies program curricula are designed/managed and the offshore locations where those programs get delivered. Such factors indeed limit a university's ability to maintain control over every single aspect of offshore program delivery. As confirmed by Lim (2010),

lecturers, administrators and mid-level managers generally believe that ensuring academic quality should be a responsibility shared by the deliverers of transnational degree programs in Malaysia and Singapore and the franchising universities. Nevertheless, in practice, geographical distance and contextual constraints limit a university's ability to monitor and review all aspects of delivery, leaving private higher education providers to define quality and set their own standards in its assurance.[18]

Hence, the maintenance of quality control in TNHE programs delivered offshore becomes difficult to fully achieve “because locally hired staff may have different cultural values and may find it hard to apply academic regulations and procedures developed by the home university” in Australia.[19] Furthermore, students involved in TNHE programs delivered offshore

are likely to bring with them differences in learning habits acquired in their home countries. This fact makes the cultural mix of any classroom even more complex, at least to those educators who can detect and interpret cultural dynamics in their classroom and the wider institutions.[20]

Healey (2016) also highlights how those students “are likely to face difficulty adapting their learning styles to the teaching methods promulgated by the home university” – a problematic issue that has also been identified, for instance, by Marginson (2011) and O'Mahoney (2014).[21] And for Bolton & Nie (2010), “a key pedagogical challenge for educators is the development of graduate attributes that authentically reflect multicultural teamwork together with related assessment techniques” in offshore delivery contexts.[22]

Due to disparities in socio-cultural contexts, in working conditions and in contractual terms of employment between offshore partners and Australian universities, teaching practices – and subsequently learning experiences – are not always reproducible offshore in exactly the same way as they occur at the home campus in Australia. Sharp (2017) pertinently reasons that

if we accept the conclusion that different cultural backgrounds actually influence the way in which people learn, then it follows that the definition of what constitutes a ‘high quality’ learning experience might differ in principle

from one cultural context to another. It certainly seems unavoidable that, in the case of cross-border education, what constitutes good teaching and learning practice on the awarding institution's home campus might not necessarily constitute good practice in the host institution.[23]

Physical distance, socio-cultural differences and contextual constraints are known to cause tensions between the different parties involved, especially when it comes to the balancing of commercial concerns (such as minimizing costs and maximizing profits) with academic priorities (such as ensuring good teaching practices and adequate learning resources). And these tensions usually end up causing variations between actual and desired academic standards, in spite of gatekeeping procedures and quality assurance processes that are contractually agreed upon and formally implemented. This can be demonstrated, for example, in Wilkins' (2017) reference to the research conducted by Hill *et al.* (2014) on UK-Malaysian TNHE partnerships whereby “they found that the primary sources of tension were control over decision-making with regards to setting tuition fee levels and the management of students, staff, and curricula, as well as quality assurance.”[24]

Communication and media studies program curricula and related teaching materials are designed and developed primarily for students enrolled at the home Australian campus. Those same program curricula implemented in Australia are subsequently provided to South East Asian offshore campuses and partnering institutions for delivery by full-time and/or part-time local teaching staff. So, what often gets delivered in South East Asian offshore contexts are essentially ‘second-hand’ program curricula that were initially intended for students operating specifically within the Australian cultural and socio-economic context. Wilkins (2017, p.1391) makes reference to Donn & Al Manthri (2010) who have argued how “Western higher education institutions sell to developing countries, or countries with insufficient higher education capacity, products that are already sold in their own countries, but which are likely outdated or unsuitable in foreign contexts.”[25]

When Australian higher education programs are dispensed offshore, teaching materials are supplied to local teaching staff with the instruction that those materials are used with offshore students without modification – predominantly to satisfy quality assurance-related requirements, as previously addressed. Such a situation often creates a particular pedagogic challenge in TNHE program delivery: many aspects of communication and media studies program curricula – readings, topics, analytical texts and case studies – are so specific to the Australian context to the point of becoming socio-culturally insensitive, or even of having no relevance, to students and teaching staff operating in offshore contexts. Healey (2016) suggests that “the difficulty of teaching students who share an alien culture and language relates closely to the extent to which the curriculum should be adapted to the local context.”[26] Stein (2017) expounds that “offering a one-size-fits-all ‘how to’ guide would be of very little practical use and would reproduce the dangerous epistemic arrogance that characterizes any claim to universal relevance.”[27] Burton & Kirshbaum

(2012) and Race (2011) for their part have argued about the need to focus on identifying the cultural differences in teaching and learning situations that involve international students and on accommodating those differences in Western-oriented teaching and learning practices.[28] Harnza (2012), Weber (2007) and Valiente (2008), amongst others, have discussed how the cultural context of learning communities actually has an influence on teaching and learning practices.[29] And, as demonstrated by Willis (2004) for example, there are indeed very legitimate reasons for adapting curricula, content, assessment and pedagogy to the specificities of TNHE delivery contexts.[30] Some Australia-specific aspects of communication and media studies programs are basically non-applicable offshore: media law for example is jurisdictionally specific; limits to freedom of speech vary from one constitution to another; interpersonal communication is intrinsically shaped by socio-cultural contexts; and so on.

III. SOME CHALLENGES IN TRANSNATIONALIZING AUSTRALIAN CURRICULA FOR TNHE DELIVERY

Ahmad (2015) makes reference to Shams & Huisman (2012) who have pointed out how “localizing the program and curriculum, while at the same time trying to offer identical courses and learning experiences to students at home and at branch campuses, is one of the biggest challenges facing transnational higher education institutions.”[31] Differences in teaching and learning practices between importing private education institutions offshore and exporting Australian universities indeed impact on students’ experience of programs as well as create pedagogic challenges for teaching staff on each side of TNHE operations to deal with. As commented by Sidhu & Christie (2015),

providers of transnational education operate in more than one set of local and national contexts. Inevitably, they experience tensions related to The multiple demands of this positioning, in which the nexus between nation-state identity and provider identity gives way to hybrid arrangements that may or may not be sustainable.[32]

The Provision of Education to International Students – Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities (2005) advises for the need of programs delivered offshore to be sensitive to the socio-cultural, educational and legal context of the countries where they are delivered.[33] But how this advice is actually followed in practice tends to vary. Healey (2016), for instance, has identified some barriers that are deemed to hinder curricular adaptation for offshore delivery, such as the policies implemented by the exporting university and by the importing country’s regulatory agencies as well as the very expectations of the local students concerned.[34] Additional hurdles to the contextual adaptation of communication and media studies program curricula can be said to include “faculty resistance to interventions perceived to threaten their autonomy” as well as “strategies for shifting organizational and/or discipline specific cultures.”[35]

Regulatory agencies in the importing countries require the same curricula implemented at the home Australian campus to be supplied to and delivered by the offshore

branch campus or local partnering education institution. And students enrolled in TNHE programs delivered offshore essentially expect the same teaching and learning experience as that which is enabled at the home campus in Australia. Determining the extent to which curricula should be standardized or localized in TNHE program delivery creates a major dilemma for universities, according to Wilkins (2017) who pertinently summarizes that while students, parents, and employers want TNHE programs to deliver the same programs that are delivered at home campuses with the same quality standards, “on the other hand, these same stakeholders want programs that are relevant and appropriate in the local business and social contexts.”[36]

Universities are often reticent with regards to allowing locally-based offshore teaching staff to change or adjust original program curricula and teaching materials used in Australia and supplied for offshore delivery. This reticence is usually influenced by concerns in Australia and in the importing country with quality assurance, especially with regards to maintaining the homogeneity of programs and to ensuring similarity of delivery across all TNHE contexts. But ultimately, “attempts to impose a common learning experience across international locations might not generate an optimum outcome but may actually harm the quality of learning that takes place.”[37]

An inflexible approach to TNHE program delivery may be justified by many universities as being part of their quality assurance and marketing strategy: to ensure that degrees and program curricula remain standardized across multiple offshore delivery contexts, and that what offshore students have paid to receive bears no difference to what they would have received had they been enrolled in Australia itself. The delivery of the same program curricula in Australia and in offshore contexts may hence not be deemed problematic at all at least from marketing and regulatory perspectives. But pedagogic issues of insensitivity, irrelevance and disparity – which emerge when transferring to offshore teaching and learning contexts aspects of program curricula that are highly specific to Australia – are however not resolved.

IV. SUGGESTED APPROACHES TO TRANSNATIONALIZING AUSTRALIAN CURRICULA FOR TNHE DELIVERY

Whilst there is a compelling argument for rigorously insisting on common

academic standards in transnational and domestic contexts, there are equally compelling reasons why we should not only expect, but under some circumstances actively encourage, variations in nature of the learning opportunities that are offered to student studying in different contexts.[38]

Although relevant for quality assurance and marketing purposes, inflexibility in delivering communication and media studies program curricula can make teaching difficult or impractical in offshore contexts as well as create pedagogic challenges that, if not well managed, lead to low student satisfaction with teaching and programs. Some kind of paradigm shift is needed with regards to how Australian higher education communication and media studies program curricula

are designed – so that they can be transnationalized, where required, to better suit the needs of students enrolled offshore.

But the majority of course designers and coordinators at the home university campus in Australia tend to be insufficiently acquainted with offshore delivery contexts to be in a position to adequately transnationalize program curricula for offshore delivery. And Australian universities do not currently share clear guidelines about the implementation of processes aiming to re-contextualize curricula to match the realities of offshore contexts.

As competition increases, countries need to rethink approaches to the design of transnational programs. A movement away from rigid and regulated models to more cooperative approaches, where the synergy of both parties creates exciting courses which are truly international, might enable these countries to maintain their market position. Currently, such opportunities are not written into the documentation that guides them in their transnational operations.[39]

Transnationalizing Australian higher education communication and media studies program curricula for offshore delivery can indeed sort out many pedagogic challenges but, for quality assurance purposes, clear guidelines – officially formalized by universities and by quality assurance agencies – need to be established concerning who does what exactly in the process of adapting, adjusting or modifying curricula as well as how that process is justified and implemented.

Productively delivering Australian higher education communication and media studies programs as well as achieving effective teaching and learning outcomes offshore necessitate the transnationalizing of curricula. Those have to become more concordant with the diverse backgrounds of South East Asian students. Communication and media studies program curricula have to be re-adjusted to suit the historical, cultural and professional features of South East Asian contexts where they get delivered. To be as relevant to offshore contexts as to Australian contexts, program curricula and teaching materials should be customized to incorporate characteristics and attributes that are specific to the offshore contexts in which they are delivered.

Delivering Australian course curricula with the kind of resolve required to be convincing in South East Asian settings should involve a collaborative process between offshore teaching staffs and onshore course designers – wherein the principal ideas and concepts of media and communication studies courses are tailored to suit specific offshore student cohorts and wherein detailed localized case studies that most effectively exemplify those very ideas and concepts are identified. Offshore teaching staffs and onshore course designers need to work closely when engaged in processes that involve changes in curriculum and content for offshore delivery so that consistency with regards to core attributes, skills and experiences can be maintained across multiple

delivery contexts. According to Bovill, Jordan & Watters (2015),

key to successful transnational teaching partnerships is reciprocity. Partners need to share a sense that there is mutual responsibility for, as well as mutual benefit from, the project and that all partners are prepared to contribute expertise, effort and resources. Without this, partnerships can feel one-sided, and resentment may build if one partner becomes dominant, either through trying to impose ideas or by raising barriers to new ideas.[40]

The kind of strategy proposed here for transnationalizing curricula may be considered as being deliberately reactionary to a fundamentally functionalist education model “whose dominant epistemology emphasizes the expert transmission of a non-negotiable curriculum of concepts and facts to relatively-passive students via highly-didactic pedagogic strategies.”[41] Socio-culturally diverse education contexts need diversified pedagogic strategies. Productive teaching and learning in TNHE programs offshore depends a lot on flexible adaptation to students of different nationalities coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and imbued with differing language proficiency and knowledge bases as well as global awareness mindsets. It should be the educator’s “task to adapt to the new environment and to modify teaching styles to fit into the new cultural context, or in order to teach and learn in a different education system with students.”[42]

The offshore delivery of higher education communication and media studies curricula that is socio-culturally determined in Australia and which purports embodiment of certainty and correct practice will not foster the kind of capabilities of professional practice that match the actual requirements of South East Asian communication and media industries. Because offshore student cohorts anticipate working in a wide variety of communication and media environments in South East Asia that have very different legal and ethical standards in comparison to those in Australia, Australian teaching and learning materials should be re-worked to integrate, for the purpose of discussion and assessment, specific characteristics of pertinence to the limitations and exceptions inherent to offshore delivery contexts. There is hence a need to attune content and delivery of course curricula to the particular policy and regulatory framework inherent to the environment in which offshore student cohorts intend to operate professionally in the future. Assessment components need adjustment to allow offshore students to develop theoretical positions not limited to Australian perspectives but also open to local or regional perspectives – by means of localized case studies and media texts – that can be derived from the linguistic and socio-cultural contexts they are already familiar with.

The interaction between educators and students in the classroom can be said to reflect “values deeply embedded in the broader societal and socio-cultural setting” of the TNHE delivery offshore in question.[43] The educator’s “approach is certainly modified by the

contextual influences found in the surrounding social, economic and political community,” according to Allen (2014) who further argues that

such cultural dynamic must be considered when teaching in the international setting. For that reason, transnational educators must be prepared to engage with the culture of the country to which they travel, and they must be willing to alter their instruction to meet the learning needs of the culture’s educational system.[44]

An effective approach to transnationalizing program curricula for delivery in South East Asia should combine the country’s specific socio-cultural nuances, ways of thinking and doing things with an Australian type of higher education. Integrating context-specific aspects would then broaden students’ horizons and generate locally employable graduates with internationally relevant skills and critical mindsets.

V. CONCLUSION

As a result of Australian universities supplying more than 800 programs to about 100,000 offshore students across South East Asia, TNHE has become a very significant service export industry for the Australian economy. “Given the highly competitive nature of many transnational higher education markets, [...] institutions that consistently achieve high student satisfaction can expect to gain a valuable competitive advantage.”[45] Transnationalizing Australian higher education curricula for offshore delivery in South East Asia has often tended to be ad hoc, perhaps tokenistic at times, with inadequate and unsatisfactory results being obtained. Various reports (Workplace Relations, NTEU, and others) have documented the unevenness of teaching and learning quality in the transnational delivery of Australian higher education in offshore contexts which, if left unchecked, would undermine in the long term student investments as well as the reputation and financial security of Australian universities.

The effective transnationalizing of course curricula should in effect contribute to the enhancement of frameworks that are meant for assuring teaching and learning quality in Australian higher education programs that are delivered offshore. Sharp (2017) has convincingly argued that “what constitutes a high quality learning opportunity in one context may not amount to the same in another” and that “cultural differences in learning preferences and cognitive styles mean that ‘quality’ in this sense must always be seen as context-dependent.”[46] As such, delivering productively communication and media studies programs as well as achieving effective teaching and learning outcomes in offshore contexts should hence involve a process of transnationalizing Australia-specific curricula that requires:

- adapting them to suit and reflect the local/regional socio-cultural realities, specificities and differences of specific offshore contexts;
- making them more responsive to regulations, procedures, laws and policies inherent to professional communication and media practice in specific offshore contexts;
- tailoring topics and assessment so that students can

engage in a productive manner with readings, case studies and analytical texts of more relevant to them in their immediate environment;

- customizing teaching materials ways that better reflect local/regional socio-cultural realities, specificities and differences of specific offshore contexts;
- adjusting pedagogical practice ways that suit the socio-culturally diverse backgrounds of offshore students.

Transnationalizing Australian higher education communication and media studies program curricula in particular comes with several challenges and unavoidably generates conflict amongst the multiple local and global stakeholders involved, each imbued with differing viewpoints and motivations. Efforts in this regard will be heavily influenced by what is expected and what is desired by the specific stakeholders concerned as well as by what is possible to realistically achieve in any given TNHE context. As such, transnationalizing processes for Australian higher education communication and media studies program curricula can be said to be in progress and still in need of further conceptualization.

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