A model for achieving equivalence and comparability in higher education courses offered transnationally by RMIT's College of Business

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This paper describes the work-in-progress of an action research pilot project conducted within the College of Business at RMIT University. The project has clarified the concepts of equivalence and comparability as applied to the College's transnational course offerings. A framework and associated process for achieving equivalence and comparability is in the final stages of development and will be trialled in one course offered at RMIT Melbourne, RMIT Vietnam and the Singapore Institute of Management. To enhance clarity, the notion of comparability has itself been divided into two additional concepts: contextualisation and customisation.
The framework provides an understanding of equivalence and comparability, the factors (elements) to be considered for each, and a broad process for working towards their achievement within individual courses. Consistent with the action research methodology, the guiding principles, framework and implementation process require review and validation by stakeholders within the College of Business, and externally by the wider transnational education community.

Keywords: transnational education quality; equivalence; comparability; offshore delivery

Introduction

This paper discusses a work-in-progress research project about equivalence and comparability in transnational education (TNE). The aim of the project is to contribute to the debate about quality in TNE by providing clarification on the meaning of equivalence and comparability, and to offer a framework and process for achieving these states in courses offered by the College of Business at RMIT University.

During the last decade the rapid growth of programs and courses offered transnationally by Australian universities has highlighted the need for effective quality assurance in TNE. Quality is identified as a key factor supporting sustainable growth in this area (DEST/AEI, 2006, pp.12-14; IEEA, 2008; QAA, 2004; UNESCO & OECD, 2005, p.17; Woodley, 2008; Ziguras, 2007).

A Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) framework was agreed by Australian Education and Training Ministers in November 2005. The strategy was refined in 2007. One of four key principles underpinning this strategy is that "Courses/programs delivered within Australia and transnationally should be equivalent in the standard of delivery and outcomes of the course, as determined under nationally recognised quality assurance arrangements" (AEI, 2007). Current guidelines provided by Australian Education International (AEI) state that, "courses delivered overseas are comparable in terms of standards of delivery, outcomes and quality with courses offered in Australia" (AEI, 2010).

The terms equivalence and comparability differ in their meanings in the context of TNE. The International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) defines the term equivalence as one that establishes minimum standards for transnational delivery, while the term comparability suggests some adaptability for local factors agreed to by active collaboration and engagement in TNE, and associated scholarship (IEAA, 2008). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK (QAAHE) associates equivalence with "benchmark statements" and "program specifications" and notes that awards obtained [in TNE contexts] are "fully equivalent" (QAA, 2004, p.15). Woodley (2009) with specific reference to Australian TNE states that there is an increasing need for programs to be comparable rather than equivalent because the former allows for greater cultural and linguistic differences between locations where a course is offered. Similarly, the UNESCO and Council of Europe (2001) 'Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education', state that TNE programs should "…encourage the awareness and knowledge of the culture and customs of both the awarding institutions and receiving country among the students and staff".

This research adopts both equivalence and comparability as different concepts, and clarifies their meaning with respect to RMIT's College of Business TNE offerings. The terms are thus placed in context and manifested in four guiding principles that underpin a model for their attainment.

Progress to date

A cyclical research approach was adopted in this project based on the action research model by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). The course Business Computing offered by the School of Business IT and Logistics was chosen for the pilot of this work as it offered at RMIT Melbourne, RMIT Vietnam and at one of the university's partners at the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM).

Factors that can impact on, or are central to the attainment of equivalence and comparability were identified and validated with course coordinators, teachers, students and program administrators at all locations where the course is offered. To achieve this, structured interviews took place in Singapore, Vietnam and Melbourne with teachers of the course and administrators. Focus groups were also held with a total of 46 students enrolled in the course in the three locations. The factors (elements) identified from this data gathering have formed the basis for a framework of equivalence and comparability.

The framework itself is being used to develop a process involving a local review of the elements identified in the framework for each course before it is offered at each location. The process requires that a group meeting of all coordinators occurs when the initial local reviews are completed, thus arriving at a joint agreement of what needs to be adapted in the course at each location to ensure that the states of equivalence and comparability have been achieved for that offering of the course.

Next steps

Information sessions are being held at schools within the College of Business to familiarise staff with the model and to seek feedback from prospective users of the model. Consistent with the action research methodology, the model will be adapted in light of this feedback. Funding has been requested to refine the development of the process. Should the application for funding be successful, the model will be piloted across other College of Business courses in 2011 to evaluate its effectiveness. Professional development is being developed, as is a 'Review Guide' and associated checklist that will inform those responsible for carrying out the local and group course reviews of the benchmarks

(standards) for each of the equivalence and comparability elements. The model in its final form will inform the development of policy at the College of Business with regard to quality assurance and more specifically, for the achievement of equivalence and comparability in its transnational offerings.

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