Attaining sustainable assessment practice in transnational education through equivalence and comparability

Tom Palaskas
Academic Development Group, College of Business, RMIT University,
tom.palaskas@rmit.edu.au

Sathiyavani Gopal
Academic Development Group, College of Business, RMIT University,
sathiyavani.gopal@rmit.edu.au

Joan Richardson
School of Business IT and Logistics, College of Business, RMIT University,
joan.richardson@rmit.edu.au

Ross Smith
School of Business IT and Logistics, College of Business, RMIT University,
ross.smith@rmit.edu.au

To ensure quality and sustainability in the economically significant transnational education (TNE) market, a course needs to achieve “equivalence” or “comparability” between its onshore and offshore offerings (Connelly et al., 2006; DEST, 2005). This paper describes the work in progress of an action research project that explores these concepts to arrive at a shared understanding of what they mean for the higher education community of the College of Business at RMIT University. A second aim of this project is to produce a process that will achieve these ideals, with regard to assessment, moderation and other factors associated with maintaining quality within individual courses. The hypothesis underpinning this research is that there is a strong correlation between sustainable assessment practice and the achievement of equivalence and comparability in TNE. The work to date has produced guiding principles to clarify the meaning of equivalence and comparability. These principles have informed the development of a framework that underpins a process for achieving these states within individual courses offered transnationally by the college. To enhance clarity, the notion of comparability has itself been divided into two concepts: contextualisation and customisation. Consistent with the action research methodology the guiding principles, framework and implementation process require review and validation both by stakeholders within the College of Business and externally by the wider transnational education community.

**Keywords:** comparability; equivalence; sustainability; transnational education

**Theme:** sustainable assessment practices and standards

**Introduction**

Rapid growth in the provision of transnational education (TNE) by Australian universities has highlighted the need for effective quality assurance processes. This is noted in the literature dealing with good practice in the provision of transnational education, in which quality is identified as central to sustaining growth in this area (DEST/AEI, 2006, pp.12-14; IEEA, 2008; QAAHE, 2004; UNESCO & OECD, 2005, p.17; Woodley, 2008; Ziguras, 2007). A Transnational Quality Strategy was approved in 2007 by the Australian education and training ministers. Key components of this strategy are four principles guiding a systematic quality assurance process. The concept of standards and comparability are introduced in the fourth principle, which states that: “courses delivered overseas are comparable in terms of standards of delivery, outcomes and quality with courses offered in Australia” (AEI, 2010).
Standards for the approval of higher education courses both domestically and offshore are listed in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, which were approved by MCEETYA in 2007. These standards apply to transnational education since they are expected to: “apply to all higher education functions of an institution, regardless of whether its higher education are students located in Australia or offshore and regardless of the delivery mode of its higher education courses” (MCEETYA, 2007, item 14, p.2). Guidelines informed by standards are also to be found in the Australian Education International’s guide to good practice in offshore delivery. These include the achievement of equivalence and comparability (IEEA, 2008). Reference to assessment and by implication its role in facilitating or underpinning equivalence and comparability, feature in most of these standards and guidelines.

This paper sets out to address the following questions:

- What do the terms ‘equivalence’ and ‘comparability’ mean in the context of the College of Business at RMIT University?
- What are the elements of equivalence and comparability to be considered for assessment practice at RMIT’s College of Business?
- What process is needed to achieve equivalence and comparability that results in sustainable assessment practice in TNE course offerings?

**Methodology**

Hopkins and Antes (1990) consider action research to be a useful way to develop curriculum by targeting specific problems and utilising ongoing feedback to shape and evaluate activities and outcomes. This fits well with the aims of this project. An action research approach was therefore adopted as the research framework, using qualitative data gathering techniques to investigate current practice with regard to equivalence and comparability in the College of Business. A study of the literature (see above) revealed different perspectives on equivalence and comparability in TNE and by reconciling these within a College of Business context it was possible to draft guiding principles that clarify the meaning of these terms (see Figure 1).

The course ‘Business Computing, offered by the School of Business, IT and Logistics, was chosen for the pilot project of this work, as it is offered by RMIT University at Melbourne, RMIT University Vietnam and one of the university’s partners in Singapore. A review was conducted of the curriculum and assessment practice related to Business Computing across the three locations where Business Computing is offered. The review included visits to the three locations to interview students and teaching staff and differences in assessment practice encountered among the three offerings of the course and contributory factors affecting equivalence and comparability were identified.

Ten focus groups were held, involving a total of 47 students. The questions asked elicited information about the relevance of the assessment tasks in Business Computing to the students’ personal context and career aspirations, and the perceived alignment of the tasks to the learning outcomes. Nine structured interviews were also conducted with seven onshore and offshore teaching staff, including course coordinators. Their views were elicited about the assessment tasks and how well the assessment worked in their local context, particularly with regard to moderation. Questions also covered internationalisation and the degree of contextualisation necessary.

The qualitative data resulting from the focus groups and interviews was categorised thematically to identify which aspects of assessment had the greatest impact on equivalence and comparability. The framework and elements were also revised accordingly. Major decisions throughout the project were iteratively tested with colleagues involved in TNE. Development of the guiding principles, framework and ongoing work on the
process was jointly carried out with other members of the project team and feedback thus obtained was used to inform new action in the development cycle.

**Findings and analysis**

A schematic diagram (Figure 1) is provided of the equivalence and comparability framework resulting from this data. The guiding principles listed in this figure clearly articulate our understanding of the main terms: equivalence, comparability, contextualisation and customisation. Although informed by Australian national protocols, guidelines and strategies associated with TNE practice, the definitions of key concepts are situated within the context of RMIT University’s policies, procedures and guidelines. Comparability is additionally defined by aspects of culture and the student profile.

The data gathering to identify differences in assessment practice at each of the locations where the course is offered resulted in the finding that assessment strategies and moderation are key considerations to achieve equivalence and that, if taken into account, the local context (contextualisation) and the student profile (customisation) can result in sustainable assessment practice in TNE. RMIT prescribes ‘assessment strategies’ that are mandatory for all course offerings both onshore and offshore. These include a range of possible assessment tasks to meet learning outcomes and the availability of formative feedback. Conversely, ‘assessment tasks’ are not prescriptive, but address the individual cultural and student characteristics represented by the cohort at each location where the course is being offered. Elements to be considered include student language proficiency, industry expectations, level of economic development, educational background, student study preferences and other aspects of the student profile.

**Conclusions and implications**

A process of applying the framework is now being developed. This is taking into account the elements identified and applies them through a review phase. It is planned to incorporate two types of reviews. First, a local review of the course will be conducted by the local coordinator at each location; and to help ensure sustainable assessment, a checklist of associated equivalence and comparability elements derived from the findings and framework is being developed. The local review is followed by a group review by all coordinators to jointly agree on assessment tasks along with other factors affecting equivalence and comparability. The final model will recommend that these reviews be carried out prior to the beginning of each teaching period, led by the principal coordinator of the course.

Further refinement and validation is planned with TNE practitioners. Funding is also being sought to apply the framework to three other business courses offered transnationally, so as to evaluate the robustness of the model across different disciplines. This work brings clarity to the terms ‘equivalence’ and ‘comparability’, provides a process for the achievement of these states in TNE course offerings, and informs the maintenance of RMIT assessment practice.