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**The Offshore Delivery of Australian Transnational
Higher Education (TNHE) in South East Asia:
Some Challenges**

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The Offshore Delivery of Australian Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in South East Asia: Some Challenges¹

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Abstract

The delivery of transnational higher education (THNE) by Australian universities across South East Asia injects annually into the Australian economy many millions of dollars in revenue. Getting an internationally recognized and reputable Australian university degree without leaving one's home country to physically go to Australia remains an attractive proposition for thousands of international students – which has ensured the continued profitability of transnational higher education operations by many Australian universities in South East Asian countries. But differences in the practices pertaining to teaching and learning and to quality assurance between exporting universities and importing countries of transnational higher education programs inevitably emerge and impact on student experience, as such creating some challenges for staff on both sides of transnational program delivery operations to tackle.

Keywords: Transnational higher education (TNHE), Australian universities, Australian higher education, internationalization of higher education, transnational higher education curriculum, global mobility of students and teaching staff, offshore program delivery, Australian higher education in South East Asia.

¹ Having operated at both the offshore and onshore campuses of various Australian universities over many years, the author has observed a number of recurring problems, identified challenges and generated some solutions in the process of delivering transnational higher education programs to different South East Asian student cohorts – many of which are addressed in this paper.

When transnational education activities are discussed, Knight (2002) has argued that such terms like ‘borderless’, ‘transnational’ and ‘cross-border’ education are often interchangeably used to refer to the real as well as virtual movement of students, educators, knowledge, and programs from one country to another. From UNESCO’s perspective, ‘transnational education’ is generally understood as involving study programs wherein “the learners are located in a country different from that where the awarding institution is based” (UNESCO-CEPES, 2000). For the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE), transnational education has been perceived as an export product and 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 (GATE, 1997, p.1).

Many forms of transnational higher education are characterized by program delivery strategies that include mass production and profit maximization with minimum expenditure. This additionally designates transnational higher education as a lucrative commodity sold and bought in the globalized marketplace, especially in the light of how, in the “marketized higher education systems that now exist globally, universities are increasingly behaving like business organizations and expanding their physical operations abroad” (Wilkins, 2016, p.168).

There are variations with regards to how the term ‘Transnational Higher Education’ (TNHE) in particular gets defined – usually according to how it is conceptualized as an activity and to how the motivations and objectives of this activity are understood in relation to specific partnerships between regions and countries. In this paper, the term ‘Transnational Higher Education’ (TNHE) is used to specifically refer to cross-border or transnational higher education activities and services characterized by the movement of programs and universities from one country to another country in physical terms and motivated by revenue generation and market expansion concerns. TNHE can exist in many forms and is delivered in various ways: offshore branch campuses, twinning arrangements, articulations, franchises, online learning, distance education and study abroad (see GATE, 1999).

Higher education has not been immune to the conditions of neo-liberalization and globalization that sweep through practically all forms of commercial pursuits, as illustrated by the proliferation of TNHE operations and activities by Australian, European and American universities across the Asian region. Sidhu & Christie (2015, p.301.) make the point that “global market forces operate in national, local and institutional contexts of supply and demand, and take specific forms. Neoliberal rationalities, while global in reach, are played out in local contexts and in particular settlements, to create the hybrid global/local spaces” of TNHE. Huang (2007, p.421) further explicates that:

Since the early 1990s [...], transnational higher education has become an increasingly important and integral part of internationalization of higher education in many countries. Compared with other parts of the world, and especially since the 1990s, there has been a rapid development of TNHE in Asia. [...]. In a major sense, Asia is the most important and active region for participation in TNHE.

It has been estimated that transnational education will constitute about 44 percent of the entire demand for international education by 2025 (Bohm *et al.*, 2002). By then, more than a million students engaged in various forms of TNHE will most likely be based in South East Asia alone.

There has been a formidable growth in Australian TNHE activities across South East Asia since the 1990s. Especially in Malaysia and Singapore, there have been significantly high enrolment numbers in various Australian TNHE programs delivered by local private higher education institutions: “enchanted by the huge economic potential, both nations have declared their intentions to become educational hubs in the Southeast Pacific region” (Lim, 2010, p.212). In line with a national agenda of enabling the masses to have more extensive access to higher education as well as to generate substantial revenue, Malaysia and Singapore have gradually become major higher education hubs in the South East Asian region and the biggest importers of institutions, programs and courses from Australian universities in particular. These two countries have by now both experienced “a shift from an initial objective of introducing private education programs to complement their limited offering of public university programs to the objective of employing private education as a key revenue-generating industry that drives the entire educational sector” (Lim, 2010, p.212).

Australian TNHE programs get delivered around South East Asia according to a multiplicity of models and methods that range from various combinations of e-learning and flexible part-time delivery options to full-time face-to-face delivery at offshore branch campuses or by partnering local private higher education providers [see Dunn & Wallace (2006); McBumie & Ziguras (2007); Miliszewska & Sztendur (2010)]. Australian TNHE program delivery situations are usually characterized by the following aspects, according to Heffernan *et al.* (2010, p.28):

- the program is conducted in accordance with a formal agreement between the Australian university and a partnering institution or organization overseas;
- the program offered is taught partly or wholly offshore (distance education programs are included only when there is a formal agreement that an overseas institution/organization participates in their delivery).
- the completion of the program results in an internationally-recognized higher education qualification;
- the Australian university that developed the program has a responsibility for overseeing academic standards (see AVCC, 1999).

The main motivation for Australian universities to seek partners offshore to engage in TNHE activities has been the need for revenue, in the light of decreasing funding to the higher education sector since the 1990s from the Australian federal government. But instead of adopting a systematic data-driven approach, it would seem however that “many institutions have taken a rushed, opportunistic approach to international expansion” reflects Wilkins (2016, p.168). As a consequence, many exporting Australian universities have exposed themselves to significant reputational and financial risks when engaging in the delivery of TNHE programs at branch campuses or in partnership with private higher education institutions offshore. And some Australian universities have paid a high price for taking such risks – as illustrated by the failed offshore operations of Edith Cowan University and of the University of New South Wales in Singapore [see Becker (2009)] for example. It should be noted that 27 international branch campuses out of a total of 230 worldwide ceased operations in 2016.

But many Australian universities are still willing to take the risk: the delivery of TNHE in South East Asia continues to be attractive not only because of the supplementary revenue generated but also because of how it contributes to raising profiles internationally and to increasing market expansion. In 2004 for instance, 52% of RMIT University’s student cohort was actually made up of transnational students enrolled in its various programs offered outside Australia, such as at its RMIT Vietnam offshore campus (ATN, 2004). By 2016, international students enrolled in both offshore and onshore programs offered by Australian universities altogether injected \$20.3 billion into the Australian economy, an 8 per cent growth compared to the previous financial year (Wells, 2016).

An appealing aspect for South East Asian students to enroll in Australian TNHE programs delivered offshore is that the tuition fees involved are usually much lower compared to those charged at the Australian campus, not to mention substantial savings made as a result of not paying for student accommodation and various living expenses if they were to study in Australia for a few years. Other than the possibility of obtaining at low cost internationally-recognized qualifications without having to leave their home country, some of the main reasons for students in South East Asia to enroll in TNHE programs offered by Australian universities offshore include: the high status of Australian expertise and research profile, the relevance of Australian qualifications to job and career prospects locally and internationally, the exposure to Australian teaching methods and learning strategies, and confidence in the quality assurance processes in place.

The delivery of TNHE programs by Australian universities in South East Asia commonly involves a local partnering private higher education institution. The Australian university concerned is “responsible for curriculum, teaching and assessment, and quality assurance” while the “provision of study location, marketing, promotion and financial administration is the responsibility of the offshore partner” (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012, p.13). As part of a broader statement about Australian higher education, namely *Universities and Their*

Students: Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) developed *The Provision of Education to International Students – Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities* which advises that when

“selecting a partner, Australian Universities should take appropriate due diligence checks, analyze financial and reputation risk to the Australian university, and enter contractual arrangements which clearly specify roles and responsibilities of the parties, service level agreements as to student services, staffing qualification and provision of library, computing and other space facilities and quality assurance processes” (AVCC, 2005, p.5).

Released in 1990, it was revised in 2001 to reflect the growing trend of Australian universities delivering TNHE outside Australia and in collaboration with various offshore partners.

The Code enables universities to regulate their own activities against agreed sector wide benchmarks within the framework of their legislation-based autonomy. All AVCC members' universities are signatories to the Code, which requires them to make a conscious commitment to adopt and maintain consistent and caring procedures in relation to the recruitment, reception, education and welfare of their international students. (AVCC, 2005, p.iii)

TNHE operations are usually required to fulfill the regulatory requirements of the host country while satisfying the academic and financial requirements of the exporting Australian university. “They 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” (Sidhu & Christie, 2015, p.301.).

Highly positive student experience, high levels of student satisfaction with programs and courses, and guarantees of quality assurance become crucial factors with regards to student achievement, to student retention and to attracting new enrolments especially within the highly competitive Malaysian and Singaporean higher education hubs in which Australian TNHE programs get delivered. Australian universities have to ensure that offshore facilities as well as administrative services, teaching delivery and learning support provided by offshore branch campuses and partnering private higher education providers are similar in standard to those provided at the main campus in Australia.

All aspects of Australian TNHE-related academic activity in Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere come under the purview of the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency* (TEQSA) which:

- regulates and assures 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 (TEQSA, 2017);
- provides 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 (TEQSA, 2017).

Lim (2010, p.215) further explains how it has also become “common practice in the negotiation of franchising arrangements in transnational higher education that the exporting university imposes contractual obligations pertaining to the quality assurance of activities based on certain standards on the importing private higher education provider.”

While quality assurance for TNHE programs is predominantly the responsibility of Australian universities, it should be noted that local partnering institutions, government and professional bodies at the offshore location are also involved and contribute to the process. As Lim (2010, p.213) clarifies:

Under intense pressure to improve their quality to sustain business operations under government regulatory reforms and to continue their partnerships with universities, private higher education providers in Malaysia and Singapore have subjected themselves to auditing by an increasing number of agencies.

Considering their non-negligible contribution to the Australian economy, it is hence primordial for Australian universities to ensure high levels of quality assurance in the delivery of their programs offshore: by means of rules, guidelines, standards and auditing processes to regulate practically all aspects of their TNHE activities.

Between the offshore locations where TNHE programs are delivered and the home campus in Australia where those programs are designed and managed, factors like geographical distance, contextual constraints and cultural gap often limit in practice a university's ability to monitor and to review every single aspect of offshore program delivery. There is no universal approach to issues of academic governance, of ownership, of legal and financial structure: these vary considerably between TNHE delivery situations and according to the kind of arrangements made by the university with each importing country and each local partner involved. As described by Miliszewska & Szetendur (2012, p.12), because there are so many “different relationships between different types of transnational education providers, delivery mechanisms, and programs/awards,” it is very difficult to chart all of those considering the constant evolution of TNHE situations that include an array of partnerships, consortia, for-profit and corporate elements. A constant challenge for Australian universities is hence to “find ways to adapt to existing policies and

practices to meet the different demands in host countries, while still respecting the standards and ethos of the home campus” (Wilkins, 2016, p.170).

Australian TNHE programs are usually marketed to offshore students as being delivered according to a similar quality of curriculum and teaching, similar quality of assessment, marking and grading, similar classroom experience and access to learning resources – like what students get at the home campus in Australia. Offshore branch campuses and partnering private higher education providers are hence usually required to deliver programs and curricula in the same way they are delivered at the Australian campus, although most students enrolled in Australian TNHE programs delivered in South East Asia would practically never interact with or meet face-to-face the academic staff responsible for those programs at the home campus in Australia.

It is common practice for most Australian TNHE programs to be delivered offshore by local part-time and full-time teaching staff who are often required to strictly adhere to the curriculum detailed by the host university and to use only the resources provided by the university that owns those programs and courses. Academic staff at the Australian campus who are assigned to develop and supply curriculum and resources, such as outlines and teaching materials, for TNHE programs often do not participate directly in any teaching nor marking but usually act as course coordinators and moderators in relation to part-time and full-time teaching staff responsible for delivering the program offshore. With regards to this aspect of quality control embedded in TNHE program coordination and moderation, Kerr & Amirthalingam (2012, p.223) emphasize the

importance of clear communication and training support from the awarding university to tutors across all locations. 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.

This reflects Harlen’s (1994) conception of moderation, for instance, that attributes an equal amount of importance to processes and activities that happen before assessment (quality assurance) and after assessment (quality control) of student work.

In the contexts of Malaysia and Singapore, standardization of the setting and marking of examination papers, for instance, is often cited as being the most commonly applied quality control measure. But it should be noted that differing amounts of authority about exam marking are actually granted by partnering Australian universities: “Malaysian schools are generally granted more authority in marking examination papers whereas the Singapore schools are subjected to more stringent control from their university partners” (Lim,

2010, p.217). According to Lim's qualitative study of quality assurance in the delivery of Australian THNE programs in Malaysia and Singapore:

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 (Lim, 2010, p.220).

But maintaining quality control in TNHE program delivery situations is fraught with difficulty, "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" (Healey, 2016, p.64) in Australia. In effect, from the perspective of some academic staff at Australian universities, local staff teaching their programs offshore are merely 'tutors' whose only duty is to deliver as is whatever material has been provided to them – as opposed to being considered as 'legitimate academics' who engage in all the activities (writing lectures, doing research, curriculum design, etc.) carried out at the home campus in Australia.

An unequal, almost 'colonial', relationship between some Australian academic staff and their offshore counterparts creates for many offshore teaching staff much frustration with and disinterest in the affairs of the Australian university concerned. As a result, offshore teaching staff often has little to no sense of professional accountability to and interest in their partner Australian universities: what ultimately matters to them is to carry out whatever is requested from them by their local employers who contract them and pay their salaries.

In many THNE delivery contexts offshore, the subsequent re-employment of local teaching staff is contingent to high pass rates and student satisfaction ratings achieved in previously taught courses. Although unstated anywhere, low passing rates and below average student satisfaction ratings will often most likely translate into the non-rehiring of teaching staff. Salary increments and performance bonuses for local teaching staff can also be affected by low passing rates and by below average student satisfaction ratings being achieved in courses taught. Simply for the sake of 'safeguarding' their professional future with a particular private higher education provider, it is not uncommon for many offshore teaching staff to adopt a somewhat 'lenient' approach to the marking of assignments, to good teaching protocols and to the implementation of rules and regulations to please students, compared to what their counterparts based in Australia do.

Healey (2016, p.63) highlights how students involved in TNHE program delivery situations "are likely to face difficulty adapting their learning styles to the teaching methods promulgated by the home university" – as identified for

instance by Heffernan, Morrison, Basu, & Sweeney (2010); Marginson (2011); O'Mahoney (2014). Differences in teaching and learning practices between the exporting Australian university and the importing countries inevitably impact on student program experience, as such raising some pedagogic challenges for teaching staff on both sides of the transnational delivery operation to tackle.

Due to significant disparities in contractual terms of employment and in working conditions, teaching quality as well as student learning experience may not be reproducible in many offshore contexts exactly as they are on Australian campuses. Geographical physical distance, contextual constraints and cultural differences have been known to produce tensions between the different parties concerned with regards to commercial pursuits and academic priorities, and to cause fluctuations between desired and actual academic standards, in spite of quality assurance processes and gatekeeping procedures in place.

According to Healey (2016, p.63), some studies – such as Miliszewska & Sztendur (2012) and Wilkins & Balakrishnan (2013) – have reported the frustration of offshore students at the chasm between the ‘brand promise’ of the home university and the reality of learning in a TNHE delivery situation with limited resources. “The struggle for survival in an increasingly competitive market also means that private higher education providers may be tempted to resort to cost-cutting measures, or to do only the minimum necessary to pass the various auditing mechanisms or obtain accreditation” (Lim, 2010, p.221). Common cost-cutting measures implemented by partnering private higher education providers offshore include: limited investment in infrastructure; ‘cheap’ labour in the form of part-time locally-based teaching staff holding only the minimum qualification necessary for teaching; hiring of few or no full-time teaching staff; and the imposition on local teaching staff to teach more courses per term and to carry out various non-academic activities (marketing, general administration, exam invigilation, etc.). Relatively low remuneration for more teaching hours and for more responsibilities/duties can often cause high teaching staff turnover. While this may not be considered as a serious problem by the local partnering private higher education provider, high teaching staff turnover impacts negatively on the quality of teaching and learning and on the standards of TNHE program delivery.

When many Australian TNHE programs are delivered offshore, course materials are provided to offshore teaching staff with the insistence that these get delivered to offshore students exactly as they are and without modification. This kind of situation often engenders a recurrent problematic issue in TNHE program delivery: some aspects of curricula – topics, readings, case studies, analytical texts – are so specific to Australia to the point of being of no relevance, or else of being socio-culturally insensitive, to students enrolled in offshore contexts as well as to their locally-based teaching staff. As a result, some of the costs accrued by the host South East Asian country importing TNHE programs from Australian universities include “the potential colonization of its higher education system by largely western institutions, the attraction of its best students away from its own institutions and the

introduction of culturally or politically unacceptable material and practices,” according to Adams (1998, p.20).

Program curricula as well as their related teaching materials are predominantly developed, designed, and produced by Australian universities to be used first and foremost by students enrolled at their home campus in Australia. What often happens in South East Asia is the delivery of ‘second-hand’ curricula initially meant to cater specifically to the needs of students operating within the entirely different socio-economic and cultural context of Australia. The same program curricula used in Australia are supplied to offshore partners and campuses in various parts of South East Asia – to be subsequently delivered and taught by locally-based full-time or part-time teaching staff. “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” (Healey, 2016, p.70). As argued by Willis (2004) for example, there are legitimate reasons for adapting pedagogy, content and assessment to the specificities of the TNHE delivery context. For instance, some content is simply not universally applicable in all delivery contexts: media law and business law for example are jurisdictionally specific; the degree of freedom of speech varies from one constitution to another; and so on.

While *The Provision of Education to International Students – Code of Practice and Guidelines for Australian Universities* (AVCC, 2005) does mention that programs offered offshore should be sensitive to the educational, social, cultural and legal context of the countries in which they are delivered, how this aspect is actually approached tends to vary in practice. In most Australian TNHE program delivery situations, there have been limited efforts to custom design curricula to make them more relevant to the socio-economically and culturally diverse backgrounds of students enrolled in South East Asia. There seems to be three main barriers, as identified by Healey (2016, p.70), that inhibit the adaptation of curricula to suit offshore contexts: regulatory agencies in the host country, policies at the exporting university, and the expectations of local students.

In most instances, regulatory agencies in the importing country usually require that exactly similar program curricula used at the university in Australia to be supplied to the local partnering private higher education providers or to the offshore branch campus. Offshore students enrolled in TNHE programs often expect to receive the same material and resources as provided at the home campus in Australia. Australian universities are often reticent, and sometimes completely adamant, to allow offshore teaching staff to adjust or modify anything in the program curricula, course outlines and teaching materials that they originally supply for offshore delivery. They are more concerned with maintaining the homogeneity of their programs and of how those get delivered across all TNHE contexts in order to fulfil various quality assurance requirements in Australia and in the importing country.

Delivering exactly the same course curricula and materials in both Australian and offshore contexts may not seem like a problem at all, from regulatory and marketing perspectives. An inflexible approach to TNHE

program delivery may be justified by many Australian universities as being part of their quality assurance and marketing strategy: to ensure that degrees, programs and curricula remain standard 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. But this does not resolve pedagogic issues of disparity, irrelevance and insensitivity that occur when literally transposing aspects of curricula highly specific to Australia to any offshore teaching and learning context.

While a relevant quality assurance and marketing strategy, inflexibility in the delivery of programs and curricula creates pedagogic challenges, like making teaching quite impractical or more difficult in some offshore contexts, which if not well tackled often leads to poor student satisfaction ratings of programs, courses and teaching. Sidhu & Christie (2015, p.301) comment about how “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.”

A significant paradigm shift may be warranted with regards to how program curricula are developed, designed and delivered by Australian universities – so that they can be sufficiently internationalized to accommodate the needs of international students involved in TNHE delivery situations offshore.

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 (Smith, 2010, p.804-805).

The delivery of Australian TNHE programs offshore requires curricula to be made more concordant with the diverse background of students enrolled across the South East Asian region. Australian TNHE program curricula have to be re-oriented to suit the historical, cultural and professional features of South East Asian countries where they get delivered.

Assessment components need some re-adjusting to enable South East Asian students to develop theoretical positions that are not limited to an Australian perspective but can additionally incorporate more localized Asian perspectives and illustrative evidence (case studies, analytical texts, and so on) from the various cultural and linguistic contexts that they might be more comfortable with. Productive curriculum delivery as well as effective teaching and learning in TNHE offshore contexts require flexible adaptation of course curricula, pedagogical practice and teaching materials to meet the needs of a

student cohort characterized by diverse nationalities, cultural backgrounds, knowledge bases and global awareness mindsets.

But customizing Australian program curricula to suit the specificities of their TNHE delivery contexts can become a difficult proposition considering that the people at the Australian campus responsible for developing teaching resources and supplying curricula for TNHE programs are themselves often quite unfamiliar with the offshore contexts where their programs are delivered. And adapting, adjusting or modifying program curricula and teaching materials is not commonly part of the duties and responsibilities of part-time and full-time teaching staff employed for the purpose of delivering Australian TNHE programs offshore. Contractual duties and responsibilities of local teaching staff in many TNHE program delivery situations need a major overhaul to productively accommodate issues pertaining to curricular re-contextualization.

Most Australian universities are public-funded institutions while their offshore partners are essentially private businesses that are geared towards profit making. That fundamental difference is perhaps the source of the kind of inequalities that subsequently emerge between Australian higher education institutions and their offshore partners with regards to expectations associated with local teaching staff and with desired standards of teaching and learning. In an attempt to reduce the above-mentioned differences, some offshore partners have been particularly active in adopting and implementing exactly the same policies and procedures followed in Australian universities with regards to teaching staff-related employment, qualifications, experience, salaries, welfare, duties, responsibilities, and so on. Other strategies – occasionally followed by some offshore partners – include an almost compulsory requirement for offshore locally-based full-time teaching staff to: (i) teach for one or two terms at the Australian campus concerned; (ii) visit the Australian university in question; (iii) acquire Australian qualifications in university teaching. But adopting and implementing the above-mentioned policies and strategies, in order to alleviate differences, can be quite costly in many offshore contexts.

The internationalization of Australian program curricula for TNHE delivery would resolve some pedagogic challenges but there has to be clear guidelines – officially formalized by the university in question – regarding who exactly is allowed to adapt, adjust and modify curricula as well as how exactly this ‘process’ gets carried out. But, in most instances, there are no clear guidelines commonly shared by Australian universities regarding how to go about with the contextual adaptation and adjustment of program curricula to suit the realities of offshore contexts. The rare occasions when curricula get customized are often the outcome of offshore teaching staff’s personal initiative, of the course designer’s and faculty’s willingness – within limits – to allow a customized version of any particular program to be delivered outside Australia.

To be as relevant to offshore contexts as to Australian contexts, course curricula and materials could be productively customized by means of incorporating far more aspects deemed pertinent to the offshore contexts they get delivered in. In the light of considerable economic trade and workforce

mobility between Australia and its offshore TNHE program delivery contexts, this might not in fact constitute a major difficulty, as it could at first be perceived from an Australian perspective at least socio-politically. Smith (2010, p.804) pertinently argues that if TNHE is viewed as more than financial gain and if the full potential of international collaborations is realized,

we need to have relationships between collaborating partners that are on a much more equal footing. Effective transnational higher education collaboration should involve staff in curriculum development activities and allow all to share experiences of teaching and learning and surely this should be reflected in the way quality assurance documents are written.

Effective teaching and learning and the productive curriculum delivery for students enrolled in Australian TNHE programs offshore should hence entail:

- adapting original curricula to suit local and regional realities, specificities and differences;
- adjusting pedagogical practice to better fulfil the needs of the offshore students concerned;
- customizing teaching materials to better reflect the local and regional context;
- tailoring topics and assessment to enable students to engage with readings, case studies and analytical texts in a productive manner that is much more pertinent to them and to their immediate environment.

Since diverse higher education contexts require diversified pedagogic strategies, the approach to teaching and learning in TNHE program delivery situations needs to evolve in terms of flexible adaptation to students from very different age groups, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, language proficiency and knowledge bases, and global awareness mindsets. This can happen if Australian TNHE program delivery offshore involves the adjustment and adaptation Australia-specific curricula to suit and reflect the socio-cultural context of their transnational offshore delivery, to be more responsive to policies, laws, regulations and procedures inherent to professional practice in the offshore context of delivery.

Some of the factors that are continuously influencing change in the South East Asian higher education landscape include: new models of funding for TNHE offshore, rising demand for internationally recognized higher education qualifications, technological advances that improve and facilitate teaching and learning, and greater global mobility of teaching staff and expertise. The concepts of quality in TNHE program delivery that offshore students look for are also always evolving: universities that do not pay attention to this evolution get caught out. In the light of the profitability of TNHE, Australian universities would not want anything to go wrong and affect revenue generation. They should hence continuously monitor the evolution of how offshore students perceive quality in how TNHE programs get delivered to them. Considering

the financial stakes, Australian universities should put more effort into identifying the specific needs of the clients that they are engaging with and serving by means of more sophisticated market surveys and analyses. This should enable Australian universities to develop a much better understanding of South East Asian student cohorts and of their particular learning habits and requirements, compared to students based onshore at the Australian campus, to have a better grasp of how “the global standardization-local adaptation is a central strategic dichotomy in the field of TNHE” (Shams & Huisman, 2011, p.16), and ultimately to run their TNHE programs offshore more effectively.

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