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Internationalisation in Vocational Education and Training: Is Internationalisation Moving from the Periphery to the Centre of VET?

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Internationalisation has been one of the most notable phenomena facing tertiary education around the globe over the past three decades. Internationalisation is a crucial response to the demands to develop graduates who possess adequate skills, knowledge and attributes to engage and perform in a globalised and intercultural world.

This is of growing importance especially given the increased number of international companies and increasing mobility of the workforce between national economies. National policy texts in Australia and Europe including the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan (2013), Australia – Going Global (2013) and the European Commission's Green Paper (2009) regard the development of global and intercultural competencies for domestic students and the mobility of young people as being crucial for national capacity building – particularly given the rise of the knowledge economy and the demands of globalisation. At the same time, at both the national and institutional levels, rationales for promoting internationalisation are mainly framed within the neo-liberal marketisation principle: the view is promulgated that tertiary education cannot continue to be supported by the public purse to the extent that it has been and education institutions must become more efficient in their operations. Incomes from international student fees are therefore becoming integral to institutions in the current context.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems are not immune to these trends and have been engaged in internationalisation practices for over three decades in Australia and other Western nations. In the VET sector, aspects of internationalisation appear to be moving from the periphery to the centre with regard to both policy and practice. However, much of the research and scholarship on internationalisation focuses on the higher education sector, while little is known about how internationalisation is operating in the vocational education systems around the world.

This research digest notes the lack of literature on internationalisation in VET and provides a discussion of the nature and key aspects of internationalisation in VET, based on a brief review of VET specific literature that is available. It argues that as an emerging field of scholarship, international VET should be acknowledged and developed as a research field that has the potential to offer valuable insights on the realities and the challenges for contemporary VET practice and policy. Based on the review of related literature, policy and practice, this research digest offers suggestions on main areas for further investigation.

Internationalisation of VET

Over the past three decades, the VET sector has engaged in various aspects of internationalisation and as noted above the main driver of this activity is to commercialise VET services and generate income for institutions. The key dimensions of internationalisation include:

- student mobility
- recruitment onshore and offshore
- staff mobility
- internationalisation of programs
- transnational institutional partnerships and industry networks, and
- the involvement of aid, consultancy and development activities in the developing regions.

The first international education activity in Australian VET commenced in the late 1980s through the Colombo Plan, which offered scholarships for scholars from the Asia Pacific region to study in technical areas in Australian TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutes (Hall, 2011). This aid scheme characterised an era of international education as an aid process. However, this was replaced by a pragmatic commercialisation-driven approach through the introduction of 'Overseas Student Policy' in 1985 (Meiras 2004). The VET sector has also been part of this transition of education as a form of aid to direct trade, which has seen the mass recruitment of international students to generate revenue for the host institutions and Australia (Cully, 2006; Moran & Ryan, 2004; Smith & Smith, 1999; Tran, 2013).

Significant reforms in VET since the late 1990s underpinned by neo-liberal principles have been regarded as the key drivers for the commercialisation of education in VET. The reforms include opening the funding of VET to privately owned education providers via contestable funding regimes where both private education providers and government owned TAFE institutions compete for government funding through either competitive tendering or 'user choice' mechanisms. These reforms have led to a decrease in government funding for VET, and the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of VET. Indeed the development of 'a competitive training market' is regarded as the most remarkable aspect of VET reforms (Anderson, 2005:13). In Australia, the VET sector currently ranks second, behind higher education, in volume of international student enrolments and it is growing (Australian Education International, 2015).

Policy agenda in VET, especially in the US and Europe, also sees internationalisation as a crucial response to the demands of the global knowledge economy, global workforce mobility and globally interconnected world. Both policy and scholarship in the US place growing emphasis on the development of community college students' intercultural capabilities and global outlook due to the nature of intercultural workplaces (Braskamp, 2011; Emert & Pearson, 2007; Raby, Rhodes & Biscarra, 2013). In Europe, the Copenhagen Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training and the European Commission emphasises 'the need for a European dimension to education and training' (2012).

While in Australia, internationalisation in VET is driven largely by the marketisation policies of successive governments, internationalisation in European VET tends to be shaped by the background trend of co-operation between European economies and the international nature of many European companies. This creates an increased demand for employees with international and intercultural competencies (Egetenmeyer & Rueffin, 2011).

A European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) has been put into place as a tool to support VET student mobility through the recognition of VET systems and qualifications throughout Europe (Egetenmeyer & Rueffin, 2011).

Internationalisation of teaching and learning in VET

VET teaching and learning is driven by industry needs and demands. Unlike the university sector, where curriculum content may vary, VET study is approved and packaged so that outcomes are identical across Australia and based on the achievement of units of competence, rather than on curriculum which can be varied according to specific student cohort requirements. Industry needs and workplace demands are changing partly due to global forces, workforce mobility, technological advances and changing technologies.

Almost two decades ago, Smith and Smith (1999) pointed out the development of VET programs that prepare students for global career prospects should be given more emphasis. It is argued that the Australian VET sector claims it accords emphasis on both the relevance to local industry and the need to expand its share of the international education market (Tran & Nyland, 2013). In practice, its orientation has been almost exclusively Australian focussed and acknowledgement of internationalisation has induced little more than the addition of an extra key competency to existing training programs; this being 'cultural understanding' (Mckay 2004:209).

The fact is that VET practice has outstripped VET policy development and providers have been engaged in delivering Australian qualifications offshore for more than 10 years, all the while struggling with the 'straitjacket' that Australian industry focussed qualifications require. While a focus on matching VET programs with the demands of the Australian industry is essential, the integration of international dimensions into VET programs will enhance the learning of diverse professional practice and the development of global outlooks as well as skills and attributes for effective engagement with the diverse world of work (Tran, 2013; McKay, 2004).

An international focus will also make Australian VET qualifications more applicable in offshore settings and for international students studying in Australia. Due to the flow of international students into the VET sector in developed nations, VET teaching and learning contexts are becoming increasingly diverse and no longer reflect the traditional training characteristics and boundaries that apply for local students (Tran & Nyland, 2013; Tran, 2013). Divergent and shifting study purposes, new learning characteristics, new relationships between students and training providers and new demands for wide-ranging global industries have emerged and demanded more effective approaches to teaching the growing cohort of international students in VET.

> "VET has been recognised as a fundamental tool for building a skilled workforce in developing countries. Its strengths lie in its nature and mission of providing flexible and practical training in response to the demands of the labour market."

For example, students from China may study accounting in Australia but intend to work overseas, not just in Australia or China, throughout their career. Yet their study equips them to understand Australian accounting standards. In order to effectively engage and teach this new group of students, teachers need to develop new knowledge and capacities beyond their traditional expertise and experience (Tran, 2013; Tran & Nguyen, 2015). In addition, there seems to be confusion in the VET sector about how training packages developed for the Australian market can be adapted to suit the complex needs of international students and international markets (Moran & Ryan 2004).

The discourse around international student mobility in VET has predominantly focused on study as a migration pathway and offshore and onshore VET delivery.

However, the teaching and learning aspects of internationalisation and the adaptation of VET programs in response to the aspirations of different groups of learners – including international students and to different global/national labour markets – tend to be largely ignored (Pasura, 2014).

VET offshore

With its positioning as an export product of developed countries, VET has been recognised as a fundamental tool for building a skilled workforce in developing countries. Its strengths lie in its nature and mission of providing flexible and practical training in response to the demands of the labour market. At the same time, many developing countries are keen to learn and adapt VET systems and practices from developed countries and establish transnational partnerships in line with their needs.

There has also been growing recognition of mutual learning and increased partnerships between VET providers across developed and developing countries. Delivering 533 offshore programs in 2012 (Australian Government, 2012), public VET institutes in Australia, for example, see offshore teaching as the primary component of their international education strategy (Holden, 2013) and as a key tool for revenue generation, which is becoming increasingly important due to the government funding decrease for VET. Australian VET offshore programs enrolled 73,371 students in 2011 (AEI, 2011). To date, the most significant work done in the area of Australian VET offshore delivery are the good practice guides produced by Dempsey (2010; 2011a; 2011b; 2012), in conjunction with Victorian TAFE providers, which undertake around 70 per cent of this offshore VET. These guides demonstrate both the need for flexibility in training and the complexities of offering that flexibility within the existing VET policy framework.

The conventional approach of transnational education across all sectors – curricula developed by the home institution in one nation and simply given to the local staff and students in a foreign nation to absorb – has its supporters and detractors. Bodies such as the OECD (2012) find convergence of education systems across national boundaries efficient and useful to benchmark progress and the assumption is that best practice is occurring. For others (see for example Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012), this approach has been considered a negative, neo-colonial approach; imposing a so called best practice system on that of others without regard to their needs and cultural differences.

More recently, it has been understood that successful transnational education involves a more global approach, where it is recognised that students and teaching staff bring a diversity of cultural perspectives and educational experience to be harnessed in an education program. Shams and Huisman (2012) criticise the notion of education as either local or global and call for a 'both and' approach that does not lead to a polarised view of global education.

The pace of change and increased demand for offshore VET delivery has, however, led to national governments participating more as regulators of education systems, rather than as providers and enablers of education (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Ziguras and McBurnie (2015) have investigated how national governments respond to internationalisation of education by attempting to control and manipulate the movement of both organisations and individual students across borders. However 'selective borrowing' and local adaptation (ibid) does occur in practice. Host and home institutions adapt their offerings and find innovative ways to provide relevant outcomes for students as well as maintaining lip service to the government control mechanisms in the host country and the regulation and quality assurance requirements of the home country.

Australian VET institutions wanting to develop offshore training programs need to be aware that if they are providing Australian VET qualifications, then their offerings must be equivalent to that provided in Australia. Yet they must also be flexible enough to provide the skill development that is required in the host country. This form of adaptation requires partnerships where knowledge and trust is built over time. A transnational education project is not a quick or simple source of revenue for the home institution.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall international VET is an important but under-researched area in international education. The small number of studies on internationalisation on VET tend to focus mainly on the teaching and learning of international students in VET (Cao & Tran, 2014; Nakar, 2013; Tran, 2013; 2013a; Pasura, 2015; Mackay, 2004) or come in the form of good practice guide for VET offshore delivery (Dempsey, 2010, 2011, 2012).

There are thus many green fields identified for scholarly research on international VET:

1. What are the sectoral and institutional changes needed under the impact of internationalisation?

2. How do neo-liberal marketisation trends impact on VET practices?

3. What are the institutional tensions in bringing international VET from the periphery of education activities to the centre?

4. To what extent is internationalisation considered a powerful force for change in VET across different national contexts?

5. How are VET programs and traditional 'Western' VET models appropriated to suit local needs in a different country and how can different VET systems learn from each other to improve their ways of designing and delivering programs?

6. How are governments in developing nations selecting best practice in VET and how are they evolving their own systems?

7. What are the forms of partnerships with foreign institutions in VET and what are the enablers and inhibitors for these partnerships? What are the approaches to developing and sustaining international partnerships of both breadth and depth?

8. What is the range of VET activity offshore – is it primarily classroom teaching or is it industry based advice or business-to-business customised training?

9. How is VET offshore delivery experienced by students, teachers and managers? For what purpose is the study undertaken? How many use it as a stepping-stone to further study at home or abroad?

10. To what extent is internationalisation at home valued and realised in VET?

11. What are the forms of professional development arranged for VET practitioners and managers involved in internationalisation? Are they adequate and comprehensive?
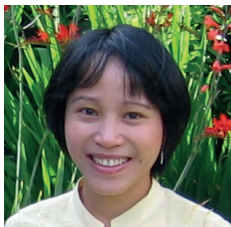
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