

Chapter 4

Transnational Distance Education: Cultural and Quality Considerations

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ABSTRACT

There have now been two decades of rhetoric on the need for culturally and contextually appropriate perspectives in international education. However, the extent to which courses, provision, and pedagogy have truly reflected differences in cultural characteristics and learning preferences is still open to question. Little attention has been paid to these matters in quality assurance frameworks. This chapter discusses these issues and draws upon Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework and studies Asian pedagogy and uses of educational technology. It proposes a benchmark and performance indicators for assuring cultural, contextual, educational, and technological appropriateness in the provision of transnational distance education in Asia by Australian universities.

BACKGROUND

Australia's universities were amongst the most aggressive in the world in the early years of higher education 'export', establishing offshore campuses, developing distance education programs, and 'fly-in/fly-out' models relying heavily on distance education resources and modalities. So dependent on international enrolment have the

Australian public universities become that the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) mandated the theme of 'internationalization' for its 2007–2010 audit cycle. This was done against a background of growing concerns about declining standards, 'soft marking', poor English language skills, weak overseas partnerships and student complaints.

Cain and Hewitt (2004) observe that in the 1950s, Australia's commitment to foreign aid included enabling future leaders in the Asian and

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Pacific countries to come and study at Australia's universities and return home to scale the heights of political, economic and educational leadership. However, with the economic downturn of the 1980s, education became a commodity, and one of Australia's leading export industries. Reid (2005) concluded that the pervasive ideology became one of establishing Australian universities as entrepreneurial businesses in an education marketplace, and Marginson and Considine (2000) characterized globalized distance education as a manifestation of the absorption of universities into the capitalist maw. AUQA expressed concern over the damage done to the nation's educational reputation by questionable practices in the stampede into the global market (Ryan, 2008) and the 'Bradley Review' (Australian Government, 2008, p. 104) observed that:

Australian students have much to gain from the internationalization of their education through developing personal international networks, gaining access to new knowledge through exposure to the diverse viewpoints of international students and thus developing broader cultural understanding. However, these benefits have been limited by the market-driven approach of some providers and their failure to internationalize the curriculum.

In August 2009, with a renewed focus on the quality of the international student experience, the then Minister for Education, the Hon. Julia Gillard MP, asked the Hon Bruce Baird AM to review the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000* and report back to the Government with changes designed to ensure that Australia continues to offer 'world-class quality international education'. The final report (Australian Government, 2010) which led to the amended *Act 2001*, included recommendations for better protection for students (in response to physical attacks on Indian students onshore), the regulatory environment for providers (following the collapse of some private colleges), business sustainability

and a consistent risk management approach, and the establishment of an International Student Ombudsman position. It also recommended that the Australian Government should work with industry stakeholders and foreign governments to strengthen students' consumer protection rights in their home countries and continue to support the professional development of education agents. However, the resultant Act made no mention of whether it applied outside the Commonwealth's jurisdiction or whether the Ombudsman's reach would extend beyond Australia's shores. Similarly, the Universities Australia (2009) position paper *Enhancing the Student Experience and Student Safety* focuses entirely on onshore students. So, in neither set of recommendations for protecting international students and the integrity of the Australian international education sector is there specific mention of international 'external' or 'multimodal' provision.

Although the greatest number (70%) of overseas students are studying on-campus in Australia, IBISworld (*Campus Review*, 2010, pp. 11–12) reported that in 2009 nearly 113,340 students were in offshore campuses, partnership arrangements or distance education programs¹. The DEEWR (2010) statistics for 2009 do not permit simple analysis of offshore enrolment modes. However, they do provide total student numbers for what they refer to as 'external' and 'multimodal' study (in the Australian context, the latter connotes primarily distance mode, supplemented with minimal face-to-face instruction, via a local tutor or a visiting Australian-domiciled academic). The DEEWR statistics refer to 'all overseas students', but one can assume that almost all of these are residing offshore. External enrolments amount to 13,215 and multimodal 9,620, a total of 22,835 among the nearly 321,000 international students enrolled in Australian universities. These are relatively small numbers and, like distance education students generally, they are often 'invisible', especially by comparison with on-campus international students.

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