Factors influencing teachers’ international enactment of Australian VET curricula
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Abstract

Australia’s reputation for relevance and quality in transnational vocational education and training (VET) is linked to the way teachers enact the curriculum. Yet, little is known about the experiences of teachers in trying to negotiate between the imperatives of national curriculum standardisation and the needs and interests of students and their sponsors in different cultural and institutional contexts offshore. This paper seeks to contribute to the field by exploring the contextual factors that influence the implementation of Australian VET curricula, known as Training Packages, across a range of sites in different countries. It presents the initial findings from a study which explores the lived experiences of thirteen Australian and expatriate teachers enacting Training Packages in nine countries. The findings show that while there were five main factors that had the most influence, these were manifested quite differently across national and cultural contexts. As a result, there were different kinds of dissonances between the curriculum intentions and what was enacted. What these findings reveal is that a teachers’ capacity to enact the curriculum, as it was intended, relies not only on their previous knowledge and experience of the curriculum, associated pedagogies and regulations, but also on their ability to understand and influence the range of contextual factors associated with curriculum implementation. This analysis is useful because it informs the types of professional, material, practical and institutional support that teachers need to understand their situation and guide their enactment of Training Packages internationally.

Introduction

VET in its multiple forms of provision and regulation is a significant investment for governments in an era of globalisation (Keating, 2008). VET, like most forms of education, is construed as pivotal to the pursuit of a nation state’s economic competitiveness through the development of human capital (Avis, 2012) (Marginson, 2010) (Green, 1999). As nation states seek to advance their human capital, many look towards other countries, such as Australia, with well-established educational systems to import VET services and programs. In response to this demand Australian educational institutions have expanded their provision to over 40 000 students in a number of countries in the Arabian, Asian, African, South Pacific and South American regions (DET, 2007). The provision of these services and programs from one country to another country it is referred to as transnational education (McBurnie & Pollock, 1998).

Yet, the capacity of Australian educational institutions to work collaboratively with overseas sponsors to create locally relevant VET programs is hamstrung by federal government regulations. While the regulations allow teachers to make minor adaptions to the curriculum, referred to as ‘contextualising’, they must still maintain fidelity to the nationally endorsed curricula and ensure it is implemented so it is equivalent to Australia. Failure to do so can result in educational institutions losing permission to offer certain courses and at worse being fined, de-registered and/or taken to court. Given these restrictions, it is quite possible that Australian VET programs might be dissociated from the human capital needs and aspirations of other countries. Thus, questions emerge about the feasibility of meeting such expectations, including by what degree such provisions can be adapted to effectively serve the markets and still meet Australian regulatory requirements.

Yet, there is a very little research, that informs the worth and relevance of Australia offering such highly prescriptive, standardised and regulated VET programs in the global education market. Indeed, all that is known about Australian transnational VET provision is based on the findings from a handful of case studies conducted in a few Middle Eastern, South Pacific and Asian countries. Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, teachers and their managers involved in these projects have reported that Training Packages often lose meaning and relevance when implemented overseas because they are so nationally specific. Further, that trying to replicate Australian standards, as a way of ensuring quality in provision, is fraught with difficulties due to contextual differences amongst Australian and other
countries (Bailey, 2011; Bilboe, 2011; Hua, Harris, & Ollin, 2011; Karthigesu, 2007; Woodley, 2006). Indeed, research has shown that even implementing Training Packages in Australia is not always a straightforward process because teaching and learning is negotiated and modified due to contextual factors (Billett, 1995; Down, 2003; Harris et al, 2001, 2005; Guthrie, 2009; Simmons et al, 2003).

The requirement to maintain fidelity (curriculum intentions must be met) (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977) has also hindered teachers’ capacity to adapt or contextualise the curriculum so it is relevant offshore. It is important to note here that Training Packages are referred to as curricula, in this study, as they comprise a set of learning outcomes, which frame the design and the goals of the syllabus and provide guidance for assessing student performance (Smith & Keating, 2003). Yet, despite the Training Package model appearing to offer flexibility, teachers have reported that the curriculum is so tightly tied to Australian industry standards that in practice it is difficult for them to adapt it so it is relevant in different countries (Dempsey & Tao, 2017; Rahimi & Smith, 2017). While teachers have tried to adapt the curriculum by including local case studies and scenarios, in the most part they have proved unsatisfactory (Dempsey & Tao, 2017). Teachers have also had received little training and materials to adapt the curriculum so it is relevant for diverse cohorts of students internationally (Dempsey & Tao, 2017; Leask, 2004). Subsequently, teachers have been placed in a precarious situation where they have to decide between maintaining fidelity to a prescriptive, standardised and regulated curriculum or making changes to meet the students’ goals for learning, which may, at times, be different or irrelevant to the demands of the curriculum. So, when considering the relevance and quality of Australian transnational VET provision, it is important to understand the tensions and challenges, which arise for teachers trying to adapt an Australian curriculum to contemporaneously meet the needs of their students and the demands of the national regulator.

In light of the research discussed above, a phenomenological method of inquiry was chosen for this study to investigate the lived experiences of teachers in transnational contexts. The use of qualitative interviews in the research design provided rich descriptions and in-depth accounts of the phenomenon (enacting VET curriculum) from the perspective of those involved (thirteen teachers) within the social context of teaching in nine countries. The interviews provided a means to elicit, analyse and consider data about the contextual experience, actions and relationships of multiple teachers regarding the different educational contexts in which they teach Australian VET programs offshore. The teachers taught across a range of vocational areas including: Electro-technology, Architecture, Aged Care, Hospitality, Business, Project Management, Events Management and Design. They were based in nine countries in the Pacific, Asia and the Middle East. The interviews sought to answer the following research question:

What are the contextual factors that influence teachers’ enactment of the intended curriculum in transnational settings?

This question was one part of a study on the relevance, quality and sustainability of Australian transnational VET. The other parts of the study specifically focus on the influence of these factors on teachers’ decision making and their role in the implementation and transformation of Training Packages internationally.

Findings and discussion

Five main factors were identified from the analysis of the interview transcripts. These are summarised as: information, resource, material, institutional and student factors. These factors and their role and influence in curriculum implementation are presented in Table 5.1. The first column of the table identifies the five main factors. The second column states the role of each factor. The third column details the influence of each factor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Influence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Teachers’ understanding and learning about the context for curriculum implementation</td>
<td>Teacher preparedness for enacting the intended curriculum in a foreign context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>Practical support for teaching and learning the intended curriculum</td>
<td>Means by which teachers could enact the curriculum with fidelity</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Pedagogical support for adapting the curriculum to meet local needs</td>
<td>Means by which teachers could adapt the curriculum for local relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Institutional arrangements in place to support the implementation of the intended curriculum</td>
<td>Defined the structure and shape of what could be taught (curriculum content) and achieved (curriculum standards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student readiness for learning the curriculum content and achieving the curriculum outcomes</td>
<td>Teacher capacity to engage students in learning the curriculum content and facilitating their achievement of the curriculum outcomes</td>
</tr>
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</table>

It was found that the presence of these factors was particularly important for teachers’ in both enacting the curriculum as intended and adapting it for local relevance. The main reason these factors were of concern to these teachers were because they were the ones they had the least control over.

**Information factors**

It was found in ten instances, that the provision of information, through documents or professional development opportunities, would have helped teachers to develop a greater awareness of the circumstances in which the curriculum was to be implemented. This awareness was necessary for teacher readiness to, not only enact the curriculum as intended, but also adapt it to meet local needs. Information about the local context played an important role in teachers’ learning and understanding. Even though the majority of teachers were equipped with the subject and discipline experience, pedagogical expertise and curricular knowledge for an Australian context, they wanted to understand how to apply this knowledge and experience to the local situation. Thus, the provision of detailed information about the context was important for teacher understanding (Fullan, 2001; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007).

All the teachers expected that information about matters such as, the broader culture and society, local employers, the students, resources, materials and the institutional rules and arrangements, would be provided to them by either the Australian or local institution. Yet most teachers claimed that they did not receive this information, as Mick explained:

> It was a foreign situation…you have a curriculum and there was no explanation as to how we the teachers had to implement this.

Indeed, only three teachers reported receiving sufficient information to adequately prepare them for teaching overseas. The remaining ten teachers reported that their expectations were not met. As a result, they had no pre-existing frame of reference for enacting Training Packages, in any country other than Australia. Thus, the only learning available to teachers was the experience itself leaving many of them deprived of the knowledge they needed to be successful (Barrow, 2006; Cornford, 1999). Therefore, the provision of contextual information through documents, customised induction and professional development programs would have assisted in the teachers’ preparation for teaching the curriculum in a foreign country.

**Resource factors**

The allocation of certain educational and technical resources would have given nine teachers the means to enact the intended curriculum. Teachers deemed the availability and standard of resources important for supporting both the theoretical and technical elements of a vocational curriculum, as they shared:

> ...the fact that the books, resources, paper, pens, all those sorts of things, were not things that were available, or easy to get, was a bit of a challenge... I think for me in the initial stages it was the lack of resources. So what did I have? How could I just meld that into some sort of consolidated program? So that was a bit of a challenge. (Mary)

The most important thing would be more resource allocation and the reason why I say that was the Espresso machine that was there wasn’t maintained for the last two or three years...The spices were the problem and the cheeses were a problem...and vegetables, they didn’t have any
vegetables in the hotel either...the different types of gelatine that you can use in making, you know, mousses and thickeners and so on. (Damien)

These accounts about resource factors highlight the dissonance between the intended curriculum and what teachers appraised as practically possible within the resource constraints (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Such disparities meant that teachers did not always have the means to faithfully enact Training Packages internationally. Thus, resource factors were found to be important determinants of curriculum implementation because without certain facilities, equipment and supplies they were unable to teach some elements of it.

**Material factors**

It was found in ten instances, that the provision of customised and relevant site-specific curricula materials would have provided teachers with the means to teach an adapted curriculum so it was relevant to the local context. Based on their understanding and experience with the curriculum, teachers were aware that it needed to be adapted or ‘contextualised’ to suit the learning environment and the needs of students (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977; Schofield & McDonald, 2004). However, because they were unfamiliar with the local society and culture most teachers expected that they would be provided with some teaching and learning materials suitable for the site of provision (Ball & Cohen, 1996). These expectations were not realised and teachers experienced what might be best described as ‘curricular anarchy’ (Glatthorn, 1987), as Alex shared:

There was virtually nothing, no physical examples and the digital repository we had was just a mess, it was just, there was no order to it, it was just all over the place.

Even when teachers were supplied with materials they reported them as unhelpful, as Mick surmised;

The resources were unhelpful because they were inappropriate for Chinese students as everything was contextualised for Australia...and not contextualised for China. They weren’t helpful because nobody thought about the students.

Thus, materials were important for ‘curriculum literacy’ (i.e. what the curriculum should be and how to teach it) (Ariav, 1988). While teachers might have been experienced in developing teaching and learning materials for an Australian context, it did not mean that they had the knowledge and skills for contextualising the curriculum without material support. Thus, material factors were found to be important determinants of curriculum implementation because it was challenging for teachers to develop relevant materials by themselves.

**Institutional factors**

All the teachers reported that the in-country planning, organisation and management of curriculum implementation structured and shaped the curriculum content (what could be taught) and standards (what could be achieved). When the curriculum was not arranged as it was intended it was difficult for teachers to teach it as they anticipated. For example, teachers expected that arrangements such as time schedules, timetables, classroom allocation and work placements would all be put in place prior to course commencement. However, eight teachers reported that many of these arrangements were inadequate due to a lack of stakeholder understanding (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004), planning (House, 1996) and communication (Carson, 2010). Jo provided this reflection:

Yeah, when I look back at it, I was very naïve and accepting of what I was told - “Yeah, it’ll all be right, everything’s organised...We've arranged it all with the Chinese people. It’ll be fine.”

And none of it was true... I think it was just very, very poorly organised with a very poor understanding.

In many instances, teachers reported that the institutional routines and social and cultural customs often prevailed over curriculum requirements (Westbury, 2008). Indeed, seemingly mundane decisions about program timetables and class schedules had a subtle and pervasive influence on the curriculum. Due to these inadequacies the teachers found that local institutions were unable to provide many of the conditions and arrangements necessary for effective implementation of the intended curriculum (Fullan & Pomfret 1997). Subsequently, local institutional factors posed challenges to how teaching could be practiced as they shaped what was practically, culturally and politically possible for them to achieve.

**Student factors**
It was found that varying levels of student readiness influenced the teachers’ capacity to engage students in learning the curriculum content and facilitate their achievement of the curriculum outcomes. Four student readiness factors were reported: (a) goals and interest; (b) language proficiency; (c) prior knowledge and abilities; and (d) learning styles and preferences. Teachers considered these factors as having considerable influence on student achievement (the amount of curriculum content learnt in the set amount of time). These four student factors were significant to teachers because they were different to their experience with students in Australia, as Sean shared:

   It would be very difficult to make a comparison between the cohort I had in Iran as there were so many differences in terms of their backgrounds.

The teachers also reported differences between transnational students’: (a) goals and the curriculum intentions; (b) ways of being literate and the dominant literacies required by the curriculum; (c) previous knowledge and the assumed values and beliefs embedded in the curriculum; and (d) learning styles and preferences and the assumed teaching practices, which underpin the curriculum model. Altogether, the teachers’ accounts reveal that their expectations of their students as learners were derived from their own experience and beliefs about the ways in which they ought to teach the intended curriculum and how students should experience it (Cohen & Ball, 1990). Therefore, the provision of customised professional development programs would have assisted the teachers’ understanding of the learning styles and needs of their students and to learn new practices to engage and teach them.

Combination of factors

The five factors discussed above, had a key influence on: (a) teacher preparedness for enactment; (b) the means for enactment; (c) the arrangements for enactment; and (d) teacher capacity to engage students in learning and achieving the curriculum. However, it also important to note that all these factors manifested quite differently in each context due to the broader set of external environmental, social, cultural and political factors. Collectively, these factors determined the degree to which local circumstances comprised a situational readiness for implementation of the curriculum. In many situations these factors constrained curriculum implementation as most teachers found themselves unable to, at least initially, influence them. For six teachers, the extent of dissonance was so great, that the question of how they might achieve fidelity was fraught with incommensurability. It was these inequitable curriculum situations that inflicted the greatest challenges on teachers involved in transnational VET.

Conclusions

Most teachers, in this study, experienced profound dissonance between their expectations for curriculum implementation and the reality of their situations. This dissonance was illustrated by five prominent factors, which emerged through the in depth interviews. Whilst, these findings reveal constraints, the analysis is also useful because it informs the types of professional, material, practical and institutional support that teachers needed to understand their situation and guide their enactment of Training Packages offshore. In particular, the study shows the importance of having customised induction, professional development programs and contextualised materials in place for teachers so they are adequately prepared for teaching in new cultural contexts. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of Australian educational institutions negotiating with sponsors to ensure that the antecedent conditions are in place to implement the curriculum as it is intended.

These findings about the factors, which influence the implementation of Training Packages internationally, are also useful as they serve as a reminder that Training Packages are culturally bound to Australia with implicit epistemological and pedagogical orientations, which differ from those, found in other countries. Such reminders are important in understanding that the cultural values imposed by the curriculum model in other countries are not always mutually understood or meaningful between teachers bound to the Australian model and their students. Therefore, many of the factors that frustrate teachers the most emerge from having to enact curricula that were not developed for international implementation. These findings question the relevance of a policy objective of standardised outcomes for the Australian provision of vocational education and training internationally.

Acknowledgements

Supervisors of this research for EdD Griffith University:

- Professor Stephen Billett, Griffith University
- Ass Professor Sarojni Choy, Griffith University
References


