

## ***Intentionally (or not) ignored: Engaging transnational students in surveys and feedback***

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### **Abstract**

The student voice has gained significant prominence in recent years. In Australia, the renewal of quality assurance processes, together with government policies places increased emphasis on institutions having robust and systematic approaches to student feedback and evaluation that informs the ongoing enhancement of the student experience. Historically, universities have been increasingly becoming more active in the collection, analysis and reporting of local/onshore student feedback at university, course/program, unit/subject and individual teacher levels. There appears, however, to be limited attempts made by universities to embed transnational student feedback systematically into institutional stakeholder feedback frameworks. This is despite transnational education contributing significantly to Australian exports. While some universities have been successful in measuring and enhancing the transnational student experience – progress across the sector is limited. This paper aims to encourage discussion in the higher education sector about the need to embed feedback from transnational students as part of normal practice. We argue that if governments and universities see transnational higher education as an important engagement activity that generates significant income, diversifies the student profile and promotes Australian tertiary education, then feedback from students, regardless of location, is an important and sustainable part of an institution's quality assurance framework and is best practice.

*Key words:* student feedback, student experience, transnational education

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## **Transnational student experience: *It matters***

For over two decades now transnational education has been embraced by universities around the world (Carroll & Woodhouse, 2009). For Australia, international education is the third largest export industry, worth almost \$20 billion (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). The gaining of an institution's award while

studying in another country is now commonplace for many higher education students.

In 2010, there were 104,678 transnational higher education students representing 31.2% of all Australian higher education international students. The top five nationalities for transnational higher education students include: Singapore, China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia (AEI, 2011). The countries in which Australian universities are engaged most heavily in transnational program delivery include: Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Vietnam. As of April 2012, 12 Australian universities had 17 offshore campuses with two additional universities planning to open offshore campuses.

The analysis of all 39 cycle one and 27 cycle two external quality audit reports by the authors suggest that while universities continue to engage with transnational partners in various countries, limited progress has been made in systematically listening to the transnational student voice and improving the learning experience, including the provision of academic and non-academic support services. This paper argues the need for the government to develop standard survey instruments that measure the experience of all cohorts of students, including transnational students and the need for universities to embed transnational student feedback as part of their internal quality assurance frameworks. There is a pressing need for universities to effectively engage transnational students, academics and partners (including agents) in the feedback process to optimise response rates, identify areas most in need of improvement, and to act on these.

## **Transnational student feedback: *Current approaches***

The student voice has gained significant prominence in recent years. In Australia, the renewal of quality assurance processes as well as government policies has placed increased emphasis on higher education institutions having robust and systematic approaches to student feedback that inform the ongoing enhancement of the student experience. Historically, universities have been increasingly becoming more active in the collection, analysis and reporting of local/onshore student feedback at university, course/program, unit/subject and individual teacher levels.

Australian universities have for many years been actively engaged in strengthening the evaluation of the local student experience. Universities have developed internal survey instruments as part of quality assurance frameworks to evaluate the student experience at various levels including capturing the:

1. overall student experience – holistically measuring student experiences of learning and the various kinds of academic and non-academic support services, including quality of library support services, first year student experience etc;
2. course/program level experience – measuring student experiences of the course/program. The items in these instrument are mostly aligned with the national Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)
3. teacher and unit/subject level experience – measuring student experiences of the individual teacher and the unit/subject of study.

For many years the Australian government via the Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) has annually conducted the mandatory Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) with graduating onshore (local or international enrolled) students. Data is reported to the Australian government to assess institutional performance along with other performance indicators. In previous years the national AGS included transnational graduates, however, due to low response rates the GCA decided to exclude the transnational cohort from 2004.

Various other organisations have been conducting surveys with onshore cohorts of students. For example, since 2007 ACER has been pioneering the use of the Australasian University Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). Insync and i - graduate surveys are conducted to gain feedback on university services such as the library, information technology, student support, including international onshore students. In addition, the Australian Education International (AEI) conducts the onshore International Student Survey. The only externally conducted survey which provides an opportunity for transnational students to provide feedback is the biennial library insync customer satisfaction survey. This survey evaluates student experiences of library services only. None of these externally administered surveys are mandatory.

In conclusion, other than the library insync customer satisfaction survey none of the externally administered surveys that obtain feedback on the student experience of learning and the quality of academic and non-academic support services are mandatory for transnational students. Arguably, the lack of inclusion of transnational student experiences is a significant weakness in the Australian education system (Shah & Nair, forthcoming).

There appears also, however, to be limited attempts made by universities to embed transnational student feedback systematically into institutional stakeholder feedback frameworks based on the analysis of external quality audit report. In relation to university led initiatives, while many universities continue to engage with transnational education in order to diversify sources of income and increase student diversity, very few have actively engaged transnational students in formal student feedback mechanisms. An analysis undertaken by the authors in early 2012 suggests that only four Australian universities reported conducting in a systematic manner surveys that included transnational students and measured the total student experience). These universities undertake comparative analyses of the student experience of domestic, international onshore and transnational students.

While some universities have in recent years extended the end of semester unit/subject and teacher evaluations to include transnational students or partners, response rates are very low ranging from 3% - 18%. The move to the use of online survey methodologies may be contributing to the lower response rates with some transnational units/subjects having less than five responses and in some cases no responses (Shah & Nair, 2012).

The need for the government to monitor both onshore (local and international) and transnational student experiences with university and non-university providers remains critical.

## Transnational student experience: *Transnational versus onshore*

While the literature on Australian University transnational student experiences is limited, there is much to learn from the studies that have been conducted. The most recent quantitative study in Australia exploring the transnational student experience in three Australian universities echoes the need to measure transnational student experiences systematically, given a significant difference in student experiences (Shah, Roth, Nair, 2010).

A comparative analysis between onshore and transnational student experiences suggested differences in a number of areas. Compared to onshore students, transnational students placed higher importance on examination timetabling and on course outcomes such as critical thinking, communicating and a capacity to manage change. Transnational student satisfaction with library and access to computers was significantly lower than onshore students. Transnational students were also less satisfied that teaching was conducted by staff who were good teachers; and that courses had equipped them with critical thinking skills and skills to communicate with others. Table 1 outlines the results of the comparative analysis (Shah et al., 2010).

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis between Transnational and Onshore Students**

Importance Rank		Comparison between Onshore and Transnational Student Experience: Top 15 High Ranked items on Importance and Satisfaction	Satisfaction Rank	
Onshore	Transnational		Transnational	Onshore
1	1	Library	41	1
-	2	Useful range of books and study resources*	59	-
22	3	Exams are well spaced over the examination period	26	58
3	4	Teaching is conducted by staff who good teachers	31	31
-	5	Safe study environment*	1	-
-	6	Venues in good condition*	17	-
13	7	Provision of materials listed in unit outlines	36	25
9	8	The course equips to gain up-to-date knowledge and skills needed by employers	20	40
37	9	The course equips the ability to think critically	3	13
5	10	Access to computers	42	14
14	11	Problems with administrative matters are effectively resolved	44	70
12	12	Exam timetable clashes are easily resolved	23	66
6	13	Course provides clear assessment requirements	35	39
23	14	Course equips skills in communicating with people	7	22
50	15	Course equips the capacity to manage change effectively	25	53

\*denotes items only used in transnational student survey

Note: Onshore questionnaire had 85 items compared to 83 items in transnational survey which included a handful of items pertaining to the transnational experience.

Additional themes from a qualitative study include culture shock due to the intensive approach to teaching and a lack of a sense of belonging and student identity as a member of the educational community (Pyvis & Chapman, 2004).

Overall, while a few universities have been successful in measuring and enhancing the transnational student experience, there appears to be a significant lack of progress across the sector. Clearly more systematic sector wide data by institution is needed that identifies the issues that individual institution's transnational students face.

## **Transnational student experience: External scrutiny**

External quality audits conducted by the Australian Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA) have been in place in Australia since 2001. AUQA cycle one audits, between 2001-2007, were whole of university audits including a focus on: governance, learning and teaching, research, engagement, internationalisation (including transnational) and other support services. While there were many recommendations relating to transnational education in the cycle 1 audits, there were five explicit recommendations relating to evaluating the transnational student experience:

- Recommendation: exploring opportunities for integrating and sharing evaluative information with its offshore agents
- Recommendation: develop a quality assurance plan in respect of its international activities that includes, inter alia, a model contract with partnerships, due diligence of partners prior to approving contracts, provisions for program and unit approvals and regular reviews, communication systems with partners, defined assessment processes and responsibilities, academic security provisions, evaluation of student learning outcomes against domestic students as a benchmark, evaluation of teaching using an accepted methodology
- Recommendation: further follow-up to external audit of offshore programs, analyse the degree of equivalence between onshore and offshore programs in relation to academic requirements, including assessment and feedback to students, and the student experience
- Recommendation: regularly conduct comparative analyses of onshore and offshore student performance in equivalent programs, with a view to ensuring equivalent student learning outcomes
- Recommendation: strengthen its quality assurance system for transnational education, including approval of marketing and promotional materials, student support processes, student orientation and evaluation of offshore teaching staff

*(AUQA, 2002-2007)*

The student experience was an area of significant concern in cycle one audits. Key themes related to student experience based on the analysis of cycle one audit report included the need to:

- use standard student survey instruments with all cohorts of students, including transnational cohorts;

- improve student and partner institution engagement with student feedback to optimise response rates;
- undertake comparative analyses of student experiences and other academic outcomes measures with all student cohorts;
- share results of surveys and improvements undertaken with transnational partners and students;
- work closely with transnational partners in implementing and monitoring improvements;
- strengthen the role of quality committees in universities to monitor the academic outcomes and student experiences of transnational students.

The findings of cycle one AUQA audits raised many concerns about the quality assurance arrangements of transnational education across the sector. This prompted the government to choose internationalisation as a mandatory theme in almost all cycle two audits (31 cycle two audits were conducted with four audit reports yet to be released as of April 2012 and eight universities not audited by AUQA due to the formation of TEQSA).

An analysis of the 27 available cycle two AUQA audit reports by the authors on transnational student experience related issues suggest that two universities were commended, three were affirmed; and three received recommendations. In addition, a panel made an explicit comment in one institutional audit about the transnational student experience. The list of commendations, affirmations and recommendations relating to the transnational student experience in cycle two audits is provided in Attachment 1.

The analysis showed that only two universities were commended with one for evaluating transnational student experiences and the other for the quality of the transnational unit/subject and teaching. These two universities reported engaging transnational students in feedback and implementing improvements for the last eight years. An analysis of the areas needing improvement included:

- undertaking holistic student evaluations which measure the total transnational student experience;
- undertaking comparative analyses of onshore and transnational student experiences (*also highlighted in cycle one audits*);
- taking actions as a direct result of transnational student feedback and communicate the improvements with transnational students and partners (*also highlighted in cycle one audits*);
- improving the engagement of transnational students and partners in order to increase response rates (*also highlighted in cycle one audits*)

(AUQA, 2008-2011)

The analysis of the cycle two audit reports suggests a continuing need for monitoring and improvement of the transnational student experience, with the monitoring of transnational student experiences an area in need of significant attention.

The analysis suggests that limited progress across the sector has been made by universities to engage transnational students and partners in systematically evaluating the quality of learning, teaching and other support services.

As outlined earlier, there have been limited attempts by the government and universities themselves to systematically evaluate transnational student experiences. While the government acknowledges that international education contributes to social and economic development, no attempts have been made to develop policy instruments which would influence the need to evaluate transnational student experiences. Universities also acknowledge the contribution of international education including financial benefit; diversification of student profile including alumni, international engagement in teaching and research and other mutual benefit, however, limited progress has been made to gain insights into the experience of transnational students.

Some of the contributing factors which have led to the lack of emphasis on systematically measuring the transnational student experience may include the following:

- a lack of focus by the government to monitor the experience of transnational students as part of the annual performance assessment of institutions;
- a lack of focus by institutions to embed transnational student experiences within the institutional quality assurance and stakeholder feedback framework;
- a lack of emphasis on evaluating transnational student experiences in contracts and agreements while agreements are developed - in some cases exacerbated by the disconnection between the academic practitioners and the staff responsible for international contracts and agreements;
- a lack of focus of internal review mechanisms to seek transnational student experiences and benchmark with other cohorts of students;
- an inability to align the use of survey instruments resulting in different survey instruments used by the Australia University and the partner institution(s);
- a lack of relevance of the survey instrument to the transnational students and partners;
- a lack of translation of survey instruments into English where the unit/subject is taught in a language other than English;
- a lack of use of transnational student feedback on teaching as part of academic staff annual performance development and review processes;
- a lack of communication and promotion of surveys with transnational students, academics and partner institutions;
- a lack of sharing of results with partner institutions;
- an increased emphasis in recent years on the use of online survey methodology as a means to gather student feedback;
- a lack of systematic approach to implementing improvements in consultation with partner institutions;
- an increase in costs involved in the administering of transnational surveys.

As part of the renewal of quality assurance in Australian tertiary education, the government is in the process of reviewing the AGS and also developing the new University Experience Survey (UES) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia 2011a; and 2011b). A key weakness of the current

review of AGS and development of UES is the lack of focus on developing standard instruments which could be used by all tertiary education institutions including universities, non-university providers and registered training organisations including Technical and Further Education (TAFE). It also remains unclear as to whether transnational students will be part of the revised AGS and the new UES and whether the government will assess the transnational student experience as part of annual performance assessment of institutions. It is also unclear if the government will use any international student experience related indicators in the new MyUniversity website which will play a key role in influencing student choice.

This lack of focus on ensuring the measurement and improvement of transnational student experiences raises important questions as to whether government and institutional quality assurance and improvement practices meet good practice principles. Good practice principles enable all students to provide feedback on the quality of their university experience of learning, teaching and support services.

## **Conclusion**

Australia is in a unique position in the Asia Pacific region to expand its global reach in transnational education. The large investment in Singapore, Malaysia, China and India, along with government policies allowing reputable foreign universities to open campuses and offer programs in partnerships will continue to see the expansion of Australian transnational education.

The future growth and ongoing sustainability of transnational education, however, requires governments and universities to actively engage transnational students, partners and agents in student feedback mechanisms and in taking actions to validate and, where necessary, improve the student experience. The Australian government is in a very unique position given the current review of AGS and the development of the new UES which offers an ideal opportunity to do so.

Any future strategy should engage transnational students in providing feedback at the overall student experience, as well as at the course/program and individual teacher and unit/subject level, since there is evidence to suggest that transnational student experiences of learning and other important academic and non-academic support services may differ from onshore students.

Improving the quality and standard of tertiary education requires institutions to ensure comparable student experiences and academic outcomes irrespective of location and mode of delivery. To do so, we have argued that there is an urgent need for universities to embed transnational student feedback as a core part of internal quality assurance frameworks. Putting the experiences of all students, regardless of location, at the heart of institutional practices sets the benchmark making the future growth of Australian transnational education sustainable for all.

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