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# **International students in Australian VET – framing a research project**

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The latest figures of Australian Education International show there were 175,461 international student enrolments in VET in December 2008 (AEI, 2009). International student enrolments in VET grew by 226.9% between 2002 and 2008. The sharp increase in VET international students has occurred at a time when there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research on the objectives, learning practices and institutional responses of these students. This paper draws from the related literature on international students and international education to argue that in order to capture a full picture of the learning practices of international VET students, it is significant to examine the association between students' motivations to undertake their VET course and their adaptation to the VET curriculum.

## **Introduction**

This paper outlines the rationale and discusses the related literature for a planned four-year research project conducted between 2009 and 2012 which explores international students' study purposes, adaptation practices and institutional responses within the Australian VET sector. The discussion in this paper will be situated in the literature which highlights the VET client-driven culture and indicates the need to move beyond the deficit model which is related to viewing international students' diverse characteristics and learning practices as being problematic in the English medium institutional context. It will be argued that given the recent sharp increase in the number of international students in the Australian VET sector and the continuing debate on why international students are choosing to study in VET, it is of great importance to explore the link between students' purpose of investing in their VET study and their adaptation patterns in order to gain in-depth understandings of international VET students' learning practices.

The VET sector, in particular TAFE, did not enjoy the early exposure to international education the higher education sector gained through government aid programs including the Colombo Plan (TAFE Directors Australia 2003). As a result, historically VET was not a significant player in the international education field and had limited capacity to develop the knowledge and experience needed to provide for international students' needs.

Nevertheless the sector has experienced a steady growth in the number of international student enrolments since 1990 and has been the fastest growing sector since 2005. Thus the number of international students' enrolments in the Australian VET sector increased by 45.1% in 2008 as compared to 4.5% in higher education (AEI 2009). The bulk of the increase in international VET enrolments since 2005 has occurred in the fields of 'Management and Commerce' and 'Service, Hospitality and Transport'. It has been claimed this growth is closely associated with the advantage DIAC's Migrant Occupations in Demand List (MODL) accords international students who complete their studies in certain areas of 'Service, Hospitality and Transport' (Birrell et al 2007). However, with the recent announcement of the Minister of Immigration and Citizenship about the changes to the General Skilled Migration (GSM) program in December 2008, the above occupational fields are not included in the Critical Skills List which provides the list of occupations identified based on critical skill shortages in Australia. As a result of the changes in skilled migration policies, there may be associated changes in the fields of study that international students will be interested in pursuing in the coming years.

Alternative to seeing VET as a migration route, VET has been viewed as a pathway to skills development that can be utilised in the student's home country or a means to personal achievement and self-development. In addition, VET can be considered as a pathway to university entrance. All of these contributions are likely to have some validity and the fact that the United Kingdom saw the VET sector grow 22% in 2006 (AEI 2007) suggests the recent growth is not merely migration related. But what are the primary motivators influencing VET enrolments and the associated implications remains unclear. This is not least because the sharp increase in VET internationals has occurred at a time when there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research on the objectives, learning practices and institutional responses of these students. Given the distinct and emergent characteristics of the international student body in the VET sector there is a need to gain more insights into the reasons international students invest in VET courses and how these reasons shape their learning needs and adaptation.

### **International students viewed as 'clients' in the VET sector**

The VET sector is more prone to view students as 'clients' or 'consumers' of 'services' and 'products' than are schools, ELICOS and universities (e.g. see Hobart 1999; Smith & Smith 1999; Australian National Training Authority 2003; Mitchell et al. 2006). However, despite the current 167,000 international students enrolments in the Australian VET sector, there has been limited research on the characteristics and what is required to satisfy the learning

needs of international VET student ‘customers’ while considerable research has been devoted to these issues in higher education (Cownie & Addison 1996; Rizvi 2000; Doherty & Singh 2005; Kettle 2005; Tran 2008; Tran 2009; Wang, 2009). Research on diverse learner groups in the VET sector, conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), has focused on adult learners, students with disabilities, indigenous students, early school leavers and non-English speaking background students from different Australian ethnic communities rather than on international students. This is an inadequate situation for developing teaching practices and adopting approaches that are internationalist and inclusive of international students. Within the VET sector in Australia and overseas there is a small body of literature that has focussed on international students but this has been limited to studying literacy levels, absenteeism, visa non-compliance and how international students view the teaching practices of their host countries (Volet & Pears 1994; Leong & Pope 1999; Gunn-Lewis & Malthus 2000; McCracken 2000; Watson 2003). However, there has been an absence of empirical research on the adaptation of international students to the requirements of the Training Packages currently promoted in VET and in particular how individual students’ different motivations in studying a VET course may influence how they mediate their learning practices. Understanding international students’ learning needs and the characteristics of their adaptation process to VET pedagogic practices is significant for this will address the one of the key objectives of *Australia’s National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training* which highlights the need to build a ‘client-driven culture’ for the sector in which VET products and services will be customised to suit the particular requirements of domestic and international learners.

In seeking to understand how international students’ purposes for investing in their courses affect their adaptation and how they negotiate their ‘cultural’ learning patterns, their personal values and institutional requirements, it is imperative to move beyond the dominant ‘deficit model’ as addressed in the work of authors such as Ballard (1987), Elsey (1990) and Lacina (2002). Marginson (2008) and Ryan and Carroll (2005) state that this deficit model draws on a number of stereotypes about international students such as they are largely dependent on rote learning and surface learning, lacking analytical and critical skills, and having awkward ways in classroom participation. Within this model, international students are seen as lacking necessary skills to succeed in ‘Western’ institutions (Arkoudis, 2006; Ryan & Carroll, 2005) or as a ‘set of problems waiting to be solved’ in the classroom (Marginson, 2008:7). However, this deficit view has been challenged by growing research, which have found that international students are active and

adaptable participants in institutional academic practices and are individuals with possible variables in their approaches to learning and in specific learning motivations (McKay & Wong, 1996; Rizvi, 2000; Norton, 2001; Kettle, 2005; Koehne, 2005). The deficit view has therefore been criticised as tending to consider international students' learning styles as fixed and static and overlooks what is actually involved in their adaptation process (Volet & Renshaw 1996). Also, because international student learning is viewed within a 'deficit' framework, the quality and effectiveness of teaching is less problematized. As a result, the benefits of greater adaptability and change in pedagogical practices among teachers or academics tend to be less emphasized than adaptation on the part of the students.

An emergent stream of literature has challenged the assumptions of international students as a homogeneous group (Watkins & Biggs 1996; Rizvi 2000; Doherty & Singh 2005; Tran, 2008, 2009). Some studies have gone further by exploring in what ways international students are flexible and capable of drawing on different strategies and resources to gain access to institutional practices (e.g. Kettle 2005; Koehne 2005; Tran 2008). Highlighted in these studies is the need to avoid simply attributing learning styles to cultural backgrounds. Instead, these studies suggest the significance of exploring more adequately the complexities in students' processes of unpacking, interpreting and adapting to various institutional practices. Rethinking teaching practices and adopting approaches that are more internationalist and inclusive of international students goes hand in hand with rethinking the images of international students in the global context. Centred on students' learning 'mediation' or adaptation process is seen as offering a change from the dominant approaches on 'problems', plagiarism and policing of standards often circulating around international students. The stream of research which avoids stereotyping international students and moves beyond the deficit model in treating international students does not tend to deny the challenges international students may face or to indicate that support is not needed. Instead it argues that support for international students needs to be provided in line with building on international students' personal agency, self-formation capacity and their strategies to act, to change and to adapt, taking into account their own educational needs as well as contributions, seeing diversity as a positive resource for teaching and learning, focusing on adaptation as a mutual process for both international students and teachers as well (Marginson, 2008; Ryan & Carroll, 2005; Biggs, 2003).

## **Relationship between international students' study purposes and their learning adaptation**

Recent research has brought a broader lens to the understanding of the motivations and experiences of international students through the concepts of investment and imagined community (e.g. McKay & Wong 1996; Norton, 2001; Norton & Toohey 2002; Doherty & Singh 2005; Arkoudis & Love, 2008). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', Norton and Toohey (2002) argue that why and how learners invest in their course links to their desire to 'acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which in turn increase the value of their cultural capital' (p.122). Their argument underpins the connection of students' investment in a specific course, their purposes of so doing and their adaptation. This important relationship has however been mainly examined in the context of learners in English as a second language or English for Academic Purposes courses and has gone largely unexplored in the literature on international students in Australia and overseas. As argued above, the exploration of international students' adaptation so far has made sweeping generalizations and implies uniformity in relation to how international students study in host institutions. Other studies including Tran (2008), Kettle (2005) and Koehne (2005) which step beyond the 'deficit' framework also share a common limitation as they frame the problem within the limits of 'student agency' but overlook the importance of international students' reasons for investing in their course and how this relates to the nature of their adaptation. Analysing the link between students' values and purpose of investing in their course and their adaptation patterns will offer an alternative conceptual view from which to examine international students' learning adaptation and provide new and deeper insights into their learning practices in VET. In so doing, it will also contribute to the continuing debate on why internationals are choosing to study in the Australian VET sector and whether the recent expansion of the sector can be sustained.

The concept of investment moves beyond that of instrumental motivation proposed by Gardner because it focuses on the agency of the learner as a complex and mobile social history with multiple values who is capable to organise and reorganise a sense of place and value in the social world (Arkoudis & Love, 2008). In this sense, international VET students' acquired values are neither fixed nor unitary but shaped by their mobility, their different and dynamic interactions with the social/academic world, the impacts of prior life and educational experiences, knowledge deprived from these experiences and imaginings about desired outcomes.

Within the VET context, it has been argued that a new paradigm is needed in order to enhance our understanding of the reasons and motivations behind individuals' decisions to undertake TAFE courses (Der Linde, 2006). Der Linde contends that the human capital theory has been drawn on to evaluate TAFE graduate outcomes but fails to uncover the purposes of individuals in investing in their TAFE studies. Instead, the author proposes that the notion of personal capital should be incorporated in the exploration of TAFE students' outcomes as this enables us to capture 'the inherent impetus and values that individuals ascribe to their motivation to undertake a course of study' (p.23). Here the adoption of the concept of personal capital allows for a more in-depth understanding of not only the specific capacities that individuals invest in their programs to achieve their acquired values but also the purposes of their investment in their studies. Nevertheless, the construct of personal capital which is intimately linked to students' reasons for undertaking VET courses and how this may impact on their learning has not been explored in the related literature about international students' studying in VET. The exploration of this association appears to be of great importance to the understanding of international VET students due to their high level of mobility, their complex characteristics and their differing and perhaps shifting purposes of study in a transnational education context.

Some recent studies on international students explore the reasons why international students decide to undertake international study (Habu, 2000; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007) or why they choose one country or one institution over others (Lee, 2007; Pimpa, 2005). Research on the motivations underlying students' choice of an international education at an Australian institution's campus in Malaysia shows two forms of investment: positional investments for Malaysian nationals and self-transformative investments for non-Malaysian students (Pyvis & Chapman, 2007). The finding of this study indicates that Malaysian local students appear to make positional investments since their purpose for investing in international education is associated with the aspiration to be employed by multinational companies within Malaysia. This finding appears to support Marginson's argument that positional motivations play an important role in students' decisions about their study courses and destinations. Pyvis & Chapman's study also indicates that for non-Malaysian students, the purpose of their investment in studying at the Australian university in Malaysia is linked to their own expectation to be exposed to new outlook and new perspective of the world and the international experience. It would be interesting to see whether positional investments or transformative investments tend to be more prominent for individual international students in Australian VET institutions and if there are any other forms of investments that

students make in their study in Australia. The possible differences in relation to study purposes of local students and international students in the Australian VET sector also need to be taken into account in adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of the diverse student population.

VET teaching and learning practices are industry driven. Research into community colleges in the United States has shown that in a global economy, vocational education needs to respond to the expectations of students and the demands of business and industry for skills training (Levin, 2000, 2006). Within this context, it is increasingly important for the curriculum to be developed in accordance with marketplace demands. Employment skills and readiness have been perceived to be critical requirements for the VET curriculum. Within the VET context, learning is associated with the development of competence required in the workplace. Pyvis and Chapman's research highlights the significant relationship of trans-national students' educational experiences and their occupational aspirations and occupational selection, which are related to their imagined communities or workplaces. However, despite over 175,000 international student enrolments in VET (AEI, 2009), little is known about what may constitute employment skills and readiness and the occupational aspirations of international VET students from their own perspectives. In addition, the demands of the potential business and industry in the social contexts other than Australia where international students may be employed or seek employment after their completion of the VET courses and how those demands will be incorporated into the process of developing and adapting the curriculum are not accorded sufficient attention. In fact, Lee's (2007) study with international students in a US higher education institution reveals that students' initial expectations about the quality of the course and its application to the context of their home country appear to be unmet.

## **Research Approach**

It is proposed to conduct case studies of international students and staff from three government and three non-government VET institutions in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria in the first phase of the research between 2009 and 2010. In addition an online survey will be conducted with international students in all VET institutions in Australia in the second phase of data collection in 2011. In 2006 78% of all VET international student enrolments were with non-government institutions and 22% were with government institutions (AEI, 2007b). There was an increase of 27.9% in international student enrolments in the private sector and 19.6% in the public sector. The distinct characteristics



between the two sectors and the recent unbalanced development in international student enrolments justify the investigation of the learning practices of international students and the responses of institutions from both government and non-government sectors. Moreover, unlike the higher education sector, the VET system is the joint responsibility of both the federal government and the state or territory governments. Around 90% of all international VET enrolments were in New South Wales (50%), Victoria (28%) and Queensland (10%) in 2006 (AEI, 2007a). Therefore, it is important to ensure the coverage of these three leading states in terms of providing VET courses for international students. In each of these three states, one VET institution from the public sector and one from the private sector which have a recent significant increase in international student enrolments will be chosen for the study.

**Research instruments and case study protocol:** The instruments of this case research are (1) semi-structured interviews; (2) study of public documentation of institutional policy and strategy about internationalizing the curriculum and providing support for international students, data on international students and data on relevant VET sector policies and programs. Within each VET institutional case, interviews are conducted with three groups: international students, staff teaching in relevant disciplines and personnel administering international programs and international students support.

**Online Survey:** An online survey will be undertaken with international VET students in all VET institutions within Australia in the second phase of data collection for the project in 2011. The survey will focus on international VET students' motivations for their study choice, how they found about VET programs and their adaptation to VET practices.

## **Conclusion**

It has been argued in this paper that despite VET being the fastest growing sector in terms of international student enrolments and being prone to view international students as clients, the exploration of international students' their adaptation to study in VET has not been addressed. As international students are mobile, moving between cultures and operating in a transnational academic environment, their adaptation to the teaching and learning practices in VET should be seen as a change process. International students are able to exercise their personal agency and have the capacity to act and make changes to secure their personal, study and occupational aspirations in their educational route. The investigation of how differing and possibly shifting motives for undertaking VET studies may impact international students' learning ways reflects this view of students as mobile,

purposeful and active agents. It thus moves beyond the deficit framework which tends to treat international students' characteristics as mainly culture-driven, fixed and static across different contexts. Focusing on the link between international students' purposes of investing their VET courses and their adaptation to VET study is seen as offering a more in-depth and new investigation of international students' learning practices and their change process.

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