Learning and Teaching Investment Fund 2010
Final Project Report

Trialling and Evaluating a Framework for Adopting Models of Equivalence and Comparability

LTIF 2010 Theme
‘Innovation in the implementation of offshore teaching policy’

Dr. Tom Palaskas
Ms. Sathiyavani Gopal
College of Business
Academic Development Group

Dr. Joan Richardson
Prof. Ross Smith
College of Business
School of Business Information Technology and Logistics

Mr. Hiep Pham
Centre of Commerce and Management, RMIT Vietnam

Dr. Lawrence Sim
Singapore Institute of Management

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Project aims
This LTIF 2010 project has addressed five key questions:

- What do the terms Equivalence and Comparability (E&C) mean in the context of transnational education (TNE) within the College of Business?
- What are the elements (factors) to be considered in achieving equivalence and comparability?
- What is the framework comprising the elements above that would underpin the process to achieve E&C in courses offered transnationally by the College?
- What is the process by which E&C can be achieved in the College’s TNE courses?
- What are the implications arising from this project that can inform the development of a university-wide policy on E&C?

1.2 Project outcomes
This LTIF 2010 project has produced an E&C model for College of Business courses offered transnationally. The model comprises:

- guiding principles providing clear definitions of the terms equivalence and comparability (Appendix B);
- a framework of elements (factors) that need to be addressed to achieve equivalence and comparability (Appendix E);
- a specific process (procedures) that systematically reviews each of the equivalence elements in any course offering against a checklist of standards (Appendices G, H, I); and,
- a guide for Academic Staff (Appendix K).

An additional outcome of this project has been a successful LTIF 2011 application to broaden the application of the model to a total of five courses; three in the College of Business, and one each in the Colleges of Design and Social Context (DSC) and Science, Engineering and Health (SEH). This work has commenced.

The following outcomes complement the model and its implementation:

- Professional development and knowledge transfer involving all project team members from SIM, RMIT Vietnam and Melbourne in the development and trialling of the model.
- Presentation of the E&C model for peer review at two conferences:
  - ASCILITE 2010: Curriculum, technology, and transformation for an unknown future
  - ATN 2010: Assessment - Sustainability, Diversity and Innovation

1.3 Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That the College of Business endorse a set of guiding principles and operational definitions of equivalence and comparability including a checklist of associated E&amp;C elements;</td>
<td>College Board through Academic Development Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the terms equivalence and comparability be used consistently in RMIT documentation to minimise ambiguity; and</td>
<td>Chair, Policy and Programs Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the practicality of the model be tested under different conditions in 2011 by extending the scope of the 2010 outcomes to additional courses in the College of Business, and courses from the Colleges of SEH and DSC.</td>
<td>DVC A with PVCs A of BUS, DSC and SEH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.4 Policy implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy implications</th>
<th>Policy, Procedures, Guidelines</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The E&amp;C model should form the basis for the identification of strategies to achieve equivalence and comparability as required in item 5.2 of the Transnational Education Program and Partner Management guidelines and template.</td>
<td>Transnational Education Program and Partner Management guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A with DVC I&amp;D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific considerations about E&amp;C should be included as a component of the annual course and program review process.</td>
<td>Program quality assurance policy for TAFE and Higher Education Coursework Programs</td>
<td>DVCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An explicit reference to E&amp;C should be included with respect to obligations and responsibilities in Partner Agreements and Annexures.</td>
<td>Offshore Partners Agreements and Annexures</td>
<td>DVC A with DVC I&amp;D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement should be included in the Guidelines for Part A Course Guides noting that if the items listed under the Part A are not addressed properly, there will be a lack of equivalence with associated course offerings.</td>
<td>PART A Course Guide guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CES questions should explicitly measure student perceptions about comparability i.e. how relevant the course is to the students’ context and local factors. This should be addressed through a rewording of one or more questions.</td>
<td>Student Feedback Policy Course Level Student Feedback procedure</td>
<td>DVC A with Director Policy and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lack of reference to E&amp;C in the Offshore Teaching Models and Program Architecture policy should be addressed.</td>
<td>Offshore Teaching Models and Program Architecture policy</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university should produce strategic guidelines for what constitutes good teaching at RMIT (CES items alone informed the development of the E&amp;C elements on Teaching Quality as no other formal references were available).</td>
<td>Proposed new policy and guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement should be added to Item 8 - ‘Assessment is valid and meaningful’ of the Overarching Assessment Principles policy, noting that assessment should be comparable for courses offered transnationally by appropriate contextualisation and customisation.</td>
<td>Overarching Assessment Principles policy</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The coordination of the E&amp;C review process should be included as an accountability in the Guidelines for Program and Course Management and other documents that specify the role of course coordinators.</td>
<td>Program Quality Assurance Policy for TAFE and HE Coursework programs</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.5 Future directions

Although the context for the development of the E&C model was the course Business Computing 1, the model has broad application across all of the College of Business courses offered transnationally. This hypothesis is being tested in the LTIF 2011 phase of the project in which it will be implemented and evaluated against two additional Business courses and one each from the other two colleges. An intended outcome of this second phase of the work is to produce a plan for
the possible implementation of the model across all of the university’s courses offered transnationally.

Although the E&C model in its current form is course based, it has the potential to inform the Program Annual Review (PAR). As some E&C elements are already represented in the PAR template, the action plans resulting from the E&C group reviews can be used as a resource to inform PAR.
2. Project Description and Rationale

2.1 Background

There are not currently any specific policies or procedures to achieve equivalence and comparability in transnational courses offered by the College of Business; nor is there a consistent understanding of what these terms mean among academic staff involved in transnational teaching. This project clarifies the terms achievement and comparability and has developed a model to systematically achieve these states in courses offered transnationally by the College.

2.2 Purpose

This LTIF 2010 project has addressed five key questions:

- What do the terms Equivalence and Comparability (E&C) mean in the context of transnational education (TNE) within the College of Business?
- What are the elements (factors) to be considered in achieving equivalence and comparability?
- Could a framework underpin the process to achieve E&C in courses offered transnationally by the College?
- What is the process by which E&C can be achieved in the College’s TNE courses?
- What are the implications arising from this project that may help inform the development of a university-wide policy on E&C?

2.3 Significance of the work to the University

The E&C model resulting from this work can be implemented in all of the university’s transnational programs. It is therefore a key strategy to foster and support continual quality improvement in the courses offered transnationally by the university.

Given RMIT University’s significant international presence and its goal to maintain its competitiveness in the transnational education environment, the university needs to sustain positive perceptions about the value and quality of its offshore programs and courses. The clarification of the terms equivalence and comparability, and a systematic approach reviewing courses against clear standards to achieve these states, has the potential to further that goal and to inform the development of university-wide policy in this area.

The course reviews inherent in the E&C model will also provide a means to respond to the maintenance of quality standards such as those monitored by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).
3. Project Outcomes

The project has produced an E&C model for College of Business courses offered transnationally; see Appendix A. The model brings together three key outcomes of this project: guiding principles that clarify the meaning of equivalence, comparability, contextualisation, and customisation; a framework of equivalence and comparability elements (factors) to be considered when a course is reviewed; and, a process for conducting the review comprising a checklist with associated standards. Each of these key outcomes is described below in more detail:

3.1 Guiding Principles defining E&C

Based on a review of the literature and existing practice in this area, it was decided to distinguish between the need for course offerings to comply with predefined standards on the one hand, while on the other, to accommodate the need for flexibility related to local factors and the learning styles of students in different locations. The term equivalence is therefore associated with compliance, while comparability is related to appropriate contextualisation and customisation for each location where a course is offered.

A further distinction is made between two aspects of comparability. The term contextualisation is being used to accommodate cultural and other distinctive characteristics of a particular location. The term customisation is used to refer to adaptations necessary to meet the particular learning styles of students. In other words, contextualisation addresses ‘what’ is delivered, while customisation refers to ‘how’. The resulting guiding principles (Appendix B) clarify these terms and underpin the E&C framework.

3.2 E&C Framework

Based on the guiding principles, factors that were considered relevant in achieving E&C were identified based on discussions with other members of the project team including the PVC Teaching and Learning, Business, and the Manager, Academic Development Group. The list of factors is presented as Appendix C. The factors on this list formed the basis for questions put to teaching staff and students associated with the course Business Computing 1 in a subsequent data gathering visit to SIM and RMIT Vietnam and in similar interviews and focus groups held with Melbourne respondents.

Data gathered in this way was compiled and classified thematically; see Appendix D. These findings in turn were mapped against the requirements of the Course Guide - Part A, and other standards subject to compliance, such as policies, guidelines and directives. The mapping process thus further distilled the factors, resulting in the list of elements under equivalence in the framework.

Similarly, factors were mapped against cultural and other aspects of the local context and student profiles at each location to generate the elements of comparability in the framework. These were filtered for practicality and appropriateness. In this way, the elements of equivalence and comparability come together to form the E&C framework; see Appendix E.

The distinction between elements listed under equivalence and those under comparability is one of specificity. For example, the element ‘Assessment types’ is listed under equivalence in the framework. This refers to compliance with the broad types of assessment specified in Part A of the Course Guide. Examples of assessment types might be Essay, Report, Case study, Group work, etc. Under contextualisation however, there is a reference to ‘Assessment tasks’. The element ‘Assessment tasks’ is quite specific and requires a decision about whether the requirements of a specific assessment task, e.g. research associated with a case study ought to be contextualised for a particular cohort of students in a specific location where the course is offered.

Similarly, the element ‘WIL strategies’ listed under the equivalence part of the framework requires that the intent to implement WIL as specified by university strategic priorities is complied with when appropriate. However, the element ‘WIL activities’ listed under contextualisation refers not to
compliance but to a much more specific aspect of WIL implementation; that of the specific activities the student is expected to conduct with relation to WIL implementation, and whether these activities require contextualisation for a particular cohort of students in a specific location where the course is offered.

3.3 E&C Review process
The E&C review process requires that a ‘local’ review is conducted at least annually for every transnational course offering at each location where it is offered. For the purposes of this trial, the review was conducted as a standalone activity. To address possible workload implications in the future implementation of the process, consideration should be given to the E&C review process being formally incorporated into the annual course review.

The local review process uses an online checklist. A prototype is available at: 
http://www.rmit.edu.au/bus/adg/checklist (login is required). The online version of the checklist will be refined after the observations take place as part of the 2011 project. Hard copy of the checklist is appended to this report; see Appendix F.

The checklist is a key outcome of this project; it expands on all the equivalence and comparability elements listed in the framework by requiring the reviewer to consider key statements for each one and to mark whether the course offering is compliant.

Where an aspect of the course offering is not compliant, comments should be provided by the reviewer and saved for later discussion. The information thus submitted in the completed checklist will be saved securely online for subsequent use in an annual ‘group’ review involving the local reviewers and the Principal Course Coordinator. The group review will be conducted remotely, probably via teleconference or videoconference.

The purpose of the annual group review is to discuss the information gathered from the local reviews, and to agree on an action plan for any improvements to the course offerings that might be required to achieve equivalence and comparability. The action plan will be implemented in the next teaching period for the course. The process is represented in three flowcharts; see Appendices G, H, and I. The action plan template is represented in Appendix J.

3.4 E&C Guide for Academic Staff
The guide can be accessed by downloading it from the E&C web page within the ADG website. The guide is a resource to assist reviewers conducting online local reviews and to prepare them for the annual group review. It contains a brief introduction to equivalence and comparability and instructions on how to conduct the reviews; see Appendix K.

3.5 Outcomes related to professional development and knowledge transfer
The following outcomes complement the model and its implementation:

- The project engaged all project team members from SIM, RMIT Vietnam and Melbourne in professional development and knowledge transfer. This was due in part to the action research approach used in the conduct of the project, and also to a project aim of involving project team members in the design and development of the review process.

The Business Computing 1 coordinator from RMIT Vietnam and the lecturer teaching the course at SIM visited the College to work with the Principal Course Coordinators and the researchers; see Appendices L, M. This visit resulted in the development of the process for achieving E&C described in item 3.1.3 above. The process was trialled by conducting a local review of all three offerings of the course Business Computing 1. For this pilot project the checklist was completed offline; see Appendix N. The two offshore coordinators participated in the review led by the Principal Course Coordinators. All participants gained in-depth knowledge about E&C and the resulting action plan has improved the course Business
Computing 1 at all participating locations. The completed action plan documents the improvements; see Appendix O.

A short paper about the E&C model focusing on sustainable assessment was presented at the ATN 2010 conference (Palaskas, Gopal, Richardson & Smith, 2010). A poster presentation of was also presented at the ASCILITE 2010 conference (Gopal, Palaskas, Richardson & Smith, 2010). Peer feedback was encouraged and obtained at both conferences. Positive statements were received affirming the potential application of the model at other universities offering courses transnationally. At the ASCILITE conference a conference attendee from RMIT’s College of Science, Engineering and Health expressed interest in the potential application of the model to SEH courses.

- As part of the LTIF 2011 extension to the project, E&C seminars aimed at all teaching staff will be conducted during the visits to SIM, Taylors University and RMIT Vietnam.
4. Methodology and methods employed

4.1 Research methodology

The outcomes of the project resulted from applied research. The project has a number of characteristics that specifically favoured an action research approach. First, the project has practical outcomes (the framework and course review process) with immediate application within the selected course (Business Computing). Best & Kahn (1989) consider that “Action Research is focused on immediate application, not the development of theory on general application” (p. 21). This view is also supported by MacMillan (1996) who states that “the goal is to improve practice immediately” (p. 12).

Second, the deliverables include a review process that is applied at course level, and results in action that directly affects equivalence and comparability elements of the course and its offerings at all locations. Womack (1997) cites Issac & Michael’s view that action research is: “Practical and directly relevant to an actual situation in the working world”, and that such research “Provides an orderly framework for problem-solving” (p 6).

Third, the conduct of the project has required a number of iterations or ‘cycles’ involving consultation and participation at each stage among the four principal members of the project team and the project sponsors. Each consultation and discussion has reflected on tasks completed and where necessary, made adaptations to key tasks to match revised circumstances. The project is therefore cyclic, participative and qualitative, and fits well with Kemmis & McTaggart’s (1988) action research model. Their model proposes an iterative process comprising planning, acting, observing, reflecting and planning for the next iteration, which closely resembles how the work was carried out in this project.

4.2 Literature review

An internal RMIT review of strategic documents discovered only minor references to equivalence, and this only with respect to capabilities and learning outcomes. Pannan, Gribble & Barnes (2005) produced a report that provides a strategic framework to inform offshore teaching models, but it lacks procedural specificity that would make it a useful tool for reviewing individual courses.

A broader literature review to explore global perceptions and practice about equivalence and comparability in higher education was conducted. A partial list of keywords included transnational education; educational quality; TNE quality; Australian transnational education; equivalence; comparability; offshore delivery; assessment; and, contextualisation.

Considerations about equivalence are well situated in the discourse about TNE quality assurance. The rapid growth in the provision of TNE has highlighted the need for effective quality assurance processes and the need for strategic focus (Connelly, et al., DEST, 2005). A meta survey of Educational institutions engaging in TNE from within the European Union revealed that most institutions considered that “the main implication of transnational education was the need for commonly agreed guidelines and approaches to quality control aspects” (Adam, 2001, p.39).

Other sources attest to the need to maintain quality in TNE provision and associate the achievement of equivalence with good practice in this area (DEST/AEI, 2006, pp.12-14; IEEA, 2008; QAAHE, 2004; Ziguras, 2007).

Some sources complement the notion of equivalence with that of comparability, thus making a distinction between the two terms. Woodley (2008, p. 3) states that comparability allows for considerations about “cultural and linguistic differences”, and suggests that this fosters collaboration and input from partner institutions. In contrast, equivalence represents compliance to standards set by the home institution.

The use of the term comparability to represent more flexible comparisons between the home institution and its partners is also included in guidelines about quality of cross-border education...
produced by OECD. These recommend that programs delivered across borders “are of comparable quality and they also take into account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving country” (UNESCO & OECD, 2005, p. 14).

A Transnational Quality Strategy (TQS) was approved in 2007 by the Australian Education and Training Ministers. Key components of this strategy are four principles guiding a systematic quality assurance process. The concept of standards and comparability are introduced in the fourth principle: “courses delivered overseas are comparable in terms of standards of delivery, outcomes and quality with courses offered in Australia” (AEI, 2010). This is a less flexible interpretation of the term comparability, more akin to the term equivalence. What is meant by ‘quality’ in this statement is unclear.

Standards for the approval of higher education courses domestically and offshore are listed in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes which were approved by MCEETYA in 2007. These standards apply to transnational education since they are expected to: “...apply to all higher education functions of an institution, regardless of whether its HE students located in Australia or offshore and regardless of the delivery mode its HE courses” (MCEETYA, 2007, item 14, p.2). These standards inform the guidelines in the Australian Education International’s (AEI) guide to good practice in offshore delivery (IEEA, 2008). The standards include the need for equivalence and comparability in TNE.

By drawing a distinction between the terms equivalence and comparability and accepting the legitimacy of both, the authors decided that any framework resulting from this work would provide a balanced approach to quality assurance. In this way, the need for compliance to standards on the one hand can be addressed, while flexibility and input from partner institutions can be applied to meet their unique learning and teaching environments.

4.3 Methods employed

Initial planning
Planning involved the following tasks:
- Submission of Ethics application for low risk research
- Selection of project team and key contacts, on and offshore
- Development of a project plan and risk assessment resulting in a review of project scope
- Variations to scope of project – see item 5.1 below
- Preparation of a communication plan and drafting of formal requests for participation to offshore partners and other stakeholders
- Review and approval of project plan by all stakeholders

Data gathering
Data was gathered through an initial desk scan involving information readily available for the course Business Computing 1 and through discussions with project team members and other key staff on and offshore. The following information was mapped and compared for the course Business Computing 1 in the three locations where it was offered:
- Primary learning mode
- Learning mode
- Teacher guided hours
- Teaching schedule and content
- Course description
- Learning outcomes
- Capabilities
- Learning activities
- Learning resources including supplementary resources
- Assessment
- Assessment moderation
- Exam papers, lecture and lab material
- Student support – learning, language and administrative
Online communication

Additional data to elicit specific information from three locations where the course is offered were planned. The Singapore Institute of Management and RMIT Vietnam were visited to conduct structured interviews with teaching staff and focus groups with students. The course was also offered at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade but it was decided to exclude this location from participation in the project as explained in item 5.1 below.

The purpose of the visits was to identify factors that can be associated with the achievement of E&C, and which are perceived as important by teaching staff and students associated with this course. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with staff and students in Melbourne.

### Table 1. Schedule of interviews and focus groups at RMIT Vietnam, Melbourne and SIM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RMIT Vietnam</td>
<td>12 May 2010</td>
<td>Interview selected staff; learning environment scan</td>
<td>n=7</td>
<td>n=30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 May 2010</td>
<td>Interview selected staff; 2 focus group sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 May 2010</td>
<td>Interview selected staff; 2 focus group sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>18 May 2010</td>
<td>Interview selected staff; 1 focus group session</td>
<td>n=3</td>
<td>n=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19 May 2010</td>
<td>1 focus group session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIM</td>
<td>19 July 2010</td>
<td>Interview selected staff; 2 focus group sessions</td>
<td>n=3</td>
<td>n=12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 July 2010</td>
<td>learning environment scan; 2 focus group sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questions asked during the interviews with staff were aimed at identifying factors associated with E&C. Students were asked questions that were considered by the researchers to be related directly to comparability. Unanticipated staff and student responses that were considered relevant were also recorded; see Appendices P, Q, R.

### Sorting the data

Data collected from the visits to SIM and RMIT Vietnam was summarised and structured thematically; see Appendix C.

### Figure 1. Thematic classification of findings

Classifying the data thematically proved useful in identifying and shortlisting elements (factors) that might underpin a framework for E&C. Each was considered for practicality and degree of relevance.
Development of the E&C framework

Based on the guiding principles, factors that were considered relevant in achieving E&C were identified based on discussions with other members of the project team including the PVC Teaching and Learning, Business, and the Manager, Academic Development Group. The list of factors is presented as Appendix C. The factors on this list formed the basis for questions put to teaching staff and students associated with the course Business Computing 1 in a subsequent data gathering visit to SIM and RMIT Vietnam and in similar interviews and focus groups held with Melbourne respondents.

Data gathered in this way was compiled and classified thematically; see Appendix D. These findings in turn were mapped against the requirements of the Course Guide - Part A, and other standards subject to compliance, such as policies, guidelines and directives. The mapping process thus further distilled the factors, resulting in the list of elements under equivalence in the framework.

Similarly, factors were mapped against cultural and other aspects of the local context and student profiles at each location to generate the elements of comparability in the framework. These were filtered for practicality and appropriateness. In this way, the elements of equivalence and comparability come together to form the E&C framework; see Appendix E.

Development of the E&C model

The E&C model combines the guiding principles, the framework and the process for implementing it. The visit to Melbourne of the Associate Course Coordinator of the course Business Computing 1 at RMIT Vietnam and the lecturer teaching this course at SIM was planned to facilitate the development and validation of the model. Mr Hiep Pham (RMIT Vietnam), Dr Lawrence Sim (SIM), Dr Joan Richardson and Dr Ross Smith worked together with the researchers to validate the framework and develop a process for applying it.

This work produced a course review checklist of E&C elements (Appendix F) together with associated standards, and a process of reviews that compare each element on the checklist to current practice and against the respective standards; see Appendices G, H, I. The specific contributions of Mr Hiep Pham and Dr Lawrence Sim are detailed in Appendices L, M.

Trialling the model

The E&C model was applied in one local review including all members of the project team. Since this was the first application of the model the three local reviews representing course offerings in Melbourne, at SIM and at RMIT Vietnam were conducted jointly as one. This permitted real-time validation of the process and input from project team members from all three locations. The researchers acted as observers in the process. The completed local review checklist for the course Business Computing 1 is included as Appendix N.

A similar method was adopted to conduct the group review resulting in an E&C action plan for the course; see Appendix O.
5. Discussion

5.1 Variations to project scope
The original scope of data gathering and trialling in this project involved two courses and four locations. This was subsequently reduced to only one course offered at three locations. The reason was twofold: first, it became apparent that trialling two courses would require more time and effort than the researchers were able to allocate to the work. As a result, the scope was reduced to one course. Second, RMIT was at the time engaged in sensitive contractual negotiations with one partner. It was therefore considered prudent to not involve this partner in the data gathering and subsequent development of the E&C review process. Neither of these decisions affected the validity of data gathered or the eventual outcomes of the project.

Although the context for the development of the E&C model was the course Business Computing 1, the model has broad application, across all of the College of Business courses offered transnationally. This hypothesis is being tested in the LTIF 2011 phase of the project in which it will be implemented and evaluated against two additional Business courses and one each from the other two colleges. An intended outcome of this second phase of the work is to produce a plan for the possible implementation of the model across all of the university’s courses offered transnationally.

5.2 Linkages and relevance to strategic priorities
The outcomes of this project have relevance to the strategic Academic International Project directed towards enhancing RMIT’s practice in International Education. In particular, the sub-project Harmonising Onshore and Offshore Teaching will consider equivalence and comparability as one of its goals.

The work also has the potential to contribute to the following goals and priorities of RMIT’s Strategic Plan: *Transforming the Future 2015*:
RMIT’s vision to be Global (Priorities 1, 3)
RMIT’s vision to be Connected (Priorities 2, 3)
College of Business Strategic Directions 2011-2015 (Goal 1: Sustainable in Practice – priority c)

The E&C model has relevance to the Transnational education program and partner management guidelines, and in particular, the International Implementation Plan and Services Annexure for Offshore Delivery of a Higher Education or VET Award Program. Specifically, the model supports references to equivalence and comparability in item 5.2 of the Transnational Education Program and Partner Management template.

5.3 Factors critical to success of adopted approach
The success of this project is due in part to the following:
- Clear links to the university’s strategic priorities and top-level support for project goals
- Close alignment between the adopted research approach and project characteristics
- Considerable time spent on project planning with maximum involvement of stakeholders
- Effective communication plan with an active strategy of ‘keeping people in the loop’
- Frequent project monitoring of timelines with rapid response to project lag
- Maintaining a flexible approach to changes in the project’s context
- Maintaining a flexible approach to work allocation among project team members
- Active control of project ‘scope creep’
- Understanding strengths of individual project team members and aligning tasks to best suit that expertise

5.4 Dissemination strategies and outputs
Dissemination to date has involved interactive presentations to selected staff at SEH and DSC who are participating in the 2011 extension to this project. In the College of Business, the project has
been discussed in depth with the Deputy Heads L & T of the Schools of Accounting; Economics, Finance and Marketing; and Business Information Technology and Logistics.

At SIM, documentation has been shared with Ms Connie Chow, Manager of RMIT programs, and Ms Mary Lee, Director of Higher Education. Staff involved in local reviews at SIM have also been contacted and will attend an interactive seminar on E&C when the researchers visit SIM in February 2011.

At RMIT Vietnam all Heads of Centres and the Program Managers associated with courses involved in the 2011 project have been sent documentation and have been exposed to the model.

Interactive seminars will be offered to staff at all three Colleges later this year. Seminars have also been offered to staff at RMIT Vietnam, and Taylors University in Kuala Lumpur. These will be presented during the visits to these locations in February 2011 as part of the project extension. A short paper about the E&C model focusing on sustainable assessment was presented at the ATN 2010 conference: Assessment, Sustainability, Diversity and Innovation Curriculum (Palaskas, Gopal, Richardson & Smith, 2010).

A poster presentation of was also presented at the ASCILITE 2010 conference: Curriculum, technology and transformation for an unknown future (Gopal, Palaskas, Richardson & Smith, 2010).

All project materials and documentation associated with the E&C model including the specific outputs listed below are stored in the following ADG College of Business directory: S:\_new_s\08OperationalSupport_LTIF 2010\Tom Palaskas and Sathiya Gopal\Equivalence

- Guiding principles
- E&C framework
- Review process
- Reviewer’s guide

5.5 Evaluation of project outcomes

Each of the key outputs was exposed to critical review at each iteration of the action research and development cycle. All four project team members were involved in these reviews, either by face-to-face meetings or by email. The most intense of these sessions was during the visit by Dr Lawrence Sim and Mr Hiep Pham to work with the Principal Course Coordinators on the validation of the framework and the development of the review process.

The key components of the model, i.e. the guiding principles, E&C elements, framework, checklist and underlying review process were all applied to the course Business Computing 1 and subjected to critical review during the visit. Some adjustments to the E&C elements were made to ensure practicality and the process discussed as it would apply to SIM, RMIT Vietnam and locally to the College of Business. The number of pilot studies was reduced to one study with the course Business Computing 1. These variations of project scope are described in item 5.1.

The model was presented to the Deputy Head Learning and Teaching, School of Accounting and some suggestions to increase practicality were adopted as a result. Another suggestion adopted by the researchers was to not offer presentations to schools until the project was completed and a clearer picture of the outcomes was available. These sessions will now be offered more broadly across all colleges and staff feedback sought as a result of the successful extension of the project in 2011.

It was decided to not maintain a Wiki of project development as it was considered that participation in such a forum by stakeholders would be minimal. Instead, the model was presented for peer review at two conferences. A short paper about the E&C model focusing on sustainable assessment was presented at the ATN 2010 conference (Palaskas, Gopal, Richardson & Smith, 2010). A poster presentation of was also presented at the ASCILITE 2010 conference (Gopal,
Palaskas, Richardson & Smith, 2010). Feedback received at both conferences was positive and some attendees expressed interest in sharing information as the model evolved further in 2011.
### 6. Recommendations and future policy implications

#### 6.1 Recommendations

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<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
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<tr>
<td>That the College of Business endorse a set of guiding principles and operational definitions of equivalence and comparability including a checklist of associated E&amp;C elements;</td>
<td>College Board through Academic Development Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>the terms equivalence and comparability be used consistently in RMIT documentation to minimise ambiguity; and</td>
<td>Chair, Policy and Programs Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>the practicality of the model be tested under different conditions in 2011 by extending the scope of the 2010 outcomes to additional courses in the College of Business, and courses from the Colleges of SEH and DSC.</td>
<td>DVC A with PVCs A of BUS, DSC and SEH</td>
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#### 6.2 Policy implications

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<tr>
<th>Policy implications</th>
<th>Policy, Procedures, Guidelines</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
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<tr>
<td>The E&amp;C model should form the basis for the identification of strategies to achieve equivalence and comparability as required in item 5.2 of the Transnational Education Program and Partner Management guidelines and template.</td>
<td>Transnational Education Program and Partner Management guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A with DVC I&amp;D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific considerations about E&amp;C should be included as a component of the annual course and program review process.</td>
<td>Program quality assurance policy for TAFE and Higher Education Coursework Programs</td>
<td>DVCA</td>
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<td>An explicit reference to E&amp;C should be included with respect to obligations and responsibilities in Partner Agreements and Annexures.</td>
<td>Offshore Partners Agreements and Annexures</td>
<td>DVC A with DVC I&amp;D</td>
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<tr>
<td>A statement should be included in the Guidelines for Part A Course Guides noting that if the items listed under the Part A are not addressed properly, there will be a lack of equivalence with associated course offerings.</td>
<td>PART A Course Guide guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
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<td>CES questions should explicitly measure student perceptions about comparability i.e. how relevant the course is to the students’ context and local factors. This should be addressed through a rewording of one or more questions.</td>
<td>Student Feedback Policy Course Level Student Feedback procedure</td>
<td>DVC A with Director Policy and Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lack of reference to E&amp;C in the Offshore Teaching Models and Program Architecture policy should be addressed.</td>
<td>Offshore Teaching Models and Program Architecture policy</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university should produce strategic guidelines for what constitutes good teaching at RMIT (CES items alone informed the development of the E&amp;C elements on Teaching Quality as no other formal references were available).</td>
<td>Proposed new policy and guidelines</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement should be added to Item 8 -</td>
<td>Overarching Assessment</td>
<td>DVC A</td>
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"Assessment is valid and meaningful" of the Overarching Assessment Principles policy, noting that assessment should be comparable for courses offered transnationally by appropriate contextualisation and customisation.

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<th>Principles policy</th>
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the coordination of the E&C review process should be included as an accountability in the Guidelines for Program and Course Management and other documents that specify the role of course coordinators.

Program Quality Assurance Policy for TAFE and HE Coursework programs  

DVC A
References


Acknowledgements

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the following colleagues for the critical comments, advice and background experience provided to us over many meetings, without which we would not have been able to steer a straight course in meeting our objectives:

Dr. Eveline Fallshaw, Deputy PVC Learning and Teaching (Business)
Dr. Cathy Hall, Manager, Academic Development Group (Business)
Dr. Paul Myers, Deputy Head, Learning and Teaching (School of Accounting)
Mr. Keith Inkster, Director, Organisational Research and Quality Development Unit (ORQDU) RMIT Vietnam

We would also like to acknowledge the following project team members whose constructive and highly informed input grounded the work in practice and made the development of the model possible. We offer our sincere thanks for the collegiality, support and professionalism they applied to the project.

Dr. Joan Richardson, Principal Coordinator, Business Computing 1 (SIM, RMIT Vietnam)
Prof. Ross Smith, Principal Coordinator, Business Computing 1 (Melbourne)
Mr. Hiep Pham, Local Coordinator, Business Computing 1 (RMIT Vietnam)
Dr. Lawrence Sim, Lecturer, Business Computing 1 (SIM)

The Singapore Institute of Management was particularly helpful in supporting and facilitating our data gathering visit. We are particularly grateful to Ms. Connie Chow whose invaluable assistance in organising students for the focus groups and coordinating various project related activities ensured that our visit to SIM was trouble-free.

To all staff involved in the project at RMIT Vietnam, we offer our thanks for their participation and the time spent assisting us gather data for the project.

Finally, we would like to thank the numerous students at SIM, RMIT Vietnam and RMIT in Melbourne who participated so enthusiastically and without reservation in the focus group sessions.
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Appendix C  Factors related to Equivalence and Comparability
Appendix D  Thematic classification of findings: SIM, RMIT Vietnam
Appendix E  Equivalence and Comparability Framework
Appendix F  Course review checklist (local review)
Appendix G  Flowchart: Equivalence and Comparability Review Process (Overview of process)
Appendix H  Flowchart: Equivalence and Comparability Review Process (Local review process)
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Appendix S  Financial Statement