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Jens MUELLER
University of Waikato

Wee Liang TAN
Singapore Management University, wltan@smu.edu.sg

Hanjun HU
Fudan University

John THORNTON
University of South Australia

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Where should the action be—inside the classroom or outside the classroom? A comparison of the action-learning outcomes in Singapore, China, Korea, New Zealand and Australia

Jens Mueller[a*], Tan Wee Liang[b], Hu Hanjun[c] and John Thornton[d]

[a]Waikato Management School, Hamilton, New Zealand; [b]Singapore Management University, Singapore; [c]Fudan University, Shanghai, China; [d]University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Introduction

Entrepreneurship educators are torn between the demands of industry for developing specific and practically relevant knowledge, and the academic requirements for a well-grounded widely applicable education. Entrepreneurship education has long been identified as a critical factor in preventing future high levels of long-term unemployment, and there is evidence of a strong correlation between educational level achieved and high income over a lifetime (De Faoite *et al.*, 2003). In order to create greater community involvement, academia must move closer to the reality of the work place. Greater collaboration between the academic and business communities has been advocated for many years (Cochrane, 1988; Forcht, 1991; Gabor, 1991; Orr, 1993; Portwood, 1993; Reed, 1993; Warwick, 1989; White, 1993). A need exists for more interaction between educational environments and external organizations so that current business thinking can be introduced into schools (White, 1993).

We have reviewed more than 300 reports of students in New Zealand, Australia, China, Singapore and South Korea who have participated in a global action-learning program to teach entrepreneurship and free market economics to their respective communities, through Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE).

*Corresponding author. Waikato Management School, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand. Email: m@usainfo.net

We are using the results of this work to comment on the applicability of the PETE (Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement) model (Mueller *et al.*, 2005). The PETE model describes ingredients of an interactive action-learning program and seeks to explain that the presence of several factors can improve the effectiveness of action learning.

Self-reports from the SIFE students in the form of anonymous web survey entries are compared to separate comments from their academic faculty members and from corporate executives who evaluate the student action-learning outcomes. Students show extraordinary commitment to this action-learning work and dedicate hundreds of hours to teach entrepreneurship principles to members of their communities. They feel that their learning expectations have been met or exceeded, and they are willing to recommend this work to other students. Faculty members confirm the significant student effort and the community benefits resulting from it and indicate that this hands-on learning is more effective than case competitions.

There are significant differences in how students in different cultures view the overall program outcomes, suggesting that although the program is highly effective overall, action-learning effects of this specific program could be improved through country/culture-specific fine-tuning.

We conclude that although the initial reports of this action learning are encouraging, follow-up work would be helpful to determine the sustainability of the students' work and to investigate whether the reported enhancement of job prospects for the SIFE students have materialized after the students graduated.

Background

Recent years have witnessed the growing interest in entrepreneurship and the increasing demand of entrepreneurially focused education throughout the world. Yet, action learning, one of the arguably most effective management education approaches, as a whole remains a relatively new concept and practice in the education sector. Management education, as Grey and French (1996) indicated, has developed significantly and yet attracted extensive attention and criticism from both the practitioner and academic communities due to the rapidly changing world in which it is located. The established knowledge and teaching methods of managerial practice are currently being reassessed (Leitch & Harrison, 1999). As widely supported as management education is, evidenced by a plethora of business schools attached to many universities worldwide, management education has increasingly been criticized for lacking reality (Thorpe, 1990; Jones-Evans *et al.*, 2000). In the context of the SIFE effort, this causes considerable concern, as senior executives are willingly participating in such an action-learning effort, but also report clearly that practically relevant education is of interest to them. Traditional approaches have separated education institutions and business organizations as two isolated learning arenas (Leitch & Harrison, 1999), and we speculate that this it not a sustainable way to bring these two important participants in business education together. Chan (1994) argues that what management institutions teach is not what business organizations actually need, potentially causing a disconnect between business and universities.

Business organizations, multinationals or small enterprises, now utilize action learning, and it is applied increasingly in various arenas throughout the world. Action learning is not always defined clearly, but generally it is considered a form of learning through practice and a means of problem-solving in the real life (Smith & O'Neil, 2003). Elements of action learning (i.e. real problems, fellow leaders in the action-learning team, a reflective inquiry process, commitment to action, and focusing on learning) contribute to the building of critical leadership skills (Marquardt, 2000). There can be no substitute for real-time experience in human resource planning and development programs (Raelin, 1998).

Action learning was a comparatively late arrival on the education scene, as a means of entrepreneurship education (Mumford, 1995) though Professor Reg Revans originated it in its traditional generic form from as early as the 1940s (Revans, 1945). Interest in action learning grew among practitioners, theorists and researchers, in both the academic and organizational fields (Smith & O'Neil, 2003). Business institutions, however, did not embrace the method until late 1980s (Mumford, 1995), and we question if the SIFE format of stimulating students into managerial activities during university could accelerate business acceptance of such an action-learning approach.

Traditional management education has been widely criticized for a 'disconnect' between entrepreneurial practice and management theory—that business graduates do not have the ability to deal with real life problems when entering the world of business (Gibb, 1996). On the positive, action learning provides a signpost from traditional courses where participants develop their skills and abilities from their real life experience through trial, error and reflection, often outside academic institutions (Lessem, 1983). Action learning is, thus, a more integrative strategy towards management education focusing on the acquisition of action skills in practice (Leitch & Harrison, 1999). Various researchers have attempted to define action learning over the past 50 years. Consistent with Pedler (1983) and Mumford (1995), several authors find that the existing definitions either over emphasize one element or miss the other of action learning due to its flexibility and the widespread usage. This raises the issue of how action learning can be introduced to business school teachings as an effective complement to traditional teaching methods. We suggest that the PETE model (Mueller & Thornton, 2005) can guide educators in their future design and application of action-learning models. As an entrepreneurship education technique, action learning is different from and more comprehensive than any kinds of management education approaches. It advocates to focus on the learners rather than on the teachers (Mumford, 1984) and challenges the passive approach to learning characterized in the traditional teaching/learning techniques (Leitch & Harrison, 1999). The action-learning approach, on the other hand, has its critics. Some critics to this approach (Wallace, 1990; Harrison & Miller, 1993) highlight potential failures of action learning and question whether participants are gaining any monetary or other value out of courses as a result. Other challenges include those to the psychological and political processes intrinsic to action learning, concerned that it is overly influenced by the scientific management paradigm (Vince & Martin, 1993) and that it also promotes practice at the expense of theory, thereby,

promoting concerns about its philosophical base (Raelin, 1994). Smith (1988) identified and analyzed a weakness of action learning for lacking a balance between knowledge and practice—which has been an ongoing debate in the field of management development (Silver, 1991). Smith (1997) later addresses shortcomings often evident in the practice of action learning, including lack of systematic strategic framing, problem-structuring and problem-solving. Another criticism of action learning from Revans, extended by Mumford (1996) and Pedler (1991), is the role of mentors and tutors. SIFE, a living example of learning by doing, hopefully addresses some of these concerns through the active involvement of executives from leading worldwide firms. Wider literature reviews both supportive and critical of action learning have been compiled by Harrison (1996) and Smith and O'Neill (2003).

The challenge for business school educators is to get the students into good jobs—those which provide a stepping stone to a serious management career. Given the effectiveness reports of action learning for many decades, we have attempted to review the long-term learning outcomes from one action-learning program, designed to empower students to develop complex managerial skills while they are at university. A need exists for more interaction between educational environments and external organizations so that current business thinking can be introduced into schools (White, 1993). We speculate that the SIFE effort can effectively connect business leaders and managers, after earlier reports with a much smaller sample size indicate the favorable reaction of business leaders to the SIFE project outcomes (Mueller *et al.*, 2005a) and the positive reports from business leaders (Mueller *et al.*, 2005b). This is an action-learning program where a student learns by reflecting on the actions being taken in solving a real organizational problem with participants of similar position also experiencing challenging situations (McLaughlin & Thorpe, 1993; Eden & Huxman, 1996), specifically through the teaching of entrepreneurship principles to members of their respective communities.

Many entrepreneurial characteristics, such as self-confidence, persistence and high energy levels, cannot easily be acquired in the classroom, and this program attempts to engage students and their communities, to perform in a real environment, overcoming market resistance, structuring effective programs, measuring their outcome and demonstrating the results to executives. In a nutshell, these projects resemble real-life managerial challenges, those that these students would be expected to perform once they graduate and are hired into entry-level managerial positions. We speculate that this is one of the reasons why CEO-level senior executives of some of the largest firms worldwide (HBSC, Unilever, PepsiCo, Wal-Mart, etc.) invest their time to participate in this program.

As interest in entrepreneurship education continues to grow, the research issues addressing and assessing the design, content, audience and delivery of new programs also expand (Leitch & Harrison, 1999). A great challenge faced by management academics is to develop and improve the current curricula and modes of delivery, which not only embraces but also facilitates action learning (Salaman & Butler, 1990). Addressing the academic domain in relative exclusion from the workplace domain risks producing graduates who are unable to grasp real-world problems (Dilworth, 1996).

An important theme that has emerged from the literature is the failure of many studies and programs to take on board the cultural and social (including political) impact on entrepreneurship education and the 'entrepreneurs'. As argued by Dana (2001), culture specifics and historical experiences should be considered and included in educational programs. In countries like China, entrepreneurship remains a structural and cultural abnormal at certain stages of their economic and political developments (Sharwood, 1999; Li *et al.*, 2003). It may take decades of sustained changes in many national, cultural, political and economic institutions in these countries if they are to join the 'elite' of entrepreneurial economies and accelerate their economic growth rates (Sharwood, 1999).

SIFE attempts to bridge the gap between management theory and entrepreneurial practice in different cultures. It sees a real compatibility between the two. As the context of action learning is a real life business environment, integration is encouraged not only between theory and practice but also between academic institutions and industries (Leitch & Harrison, 1999).

Methodology

We have reviewed 300+ student responses from participants in the SIFE program, in Korea, China, Singapore to determine how this specific action-learning program can assist students to (a) connect to business leaders, (b) enhance their future career opportunities, and (c) contribute to the better understanding of sustainable enterprise community-wide. We have also surveyed more than 30 academic faculty advisors in those countries, who act as mentors to these students, and we have collected comments from business leaders who participate in the students' efforts, to validate the comments of students and faculty members.

We then tested this program against the PETE model to determine whether this action-learning effort follows the model earlier suggested as a tool to design effective action-learning programs.

Participants' responses were solicited through anonymous completions of web-based surveys (www.sifeaction.com/survey), separately for each country. The SIFE program is active in more than 40 countries, and we have selected these five Asia/Oceania countries due to easy accessibility to the participants. For China ($n = 63$), New Zealand ($n = 81$), Korea ($n = 90$) and Singapore ($n = 55$), more than 70% of the respective countries' SIFE participants have replied. For Australia ($n = 16$), the response rate is about 15%.

Investigation

Students report (Figure 1) they mainly joined the action-learning effort because they were curious, wanted to make contact with potential employers and wanted to 'have fun'. In China, a significant number of students joined for the travel opportunity associated with the program, which pays for student teams to travel to the national competition in Shanghai and to the worldwide competition in Toronto.

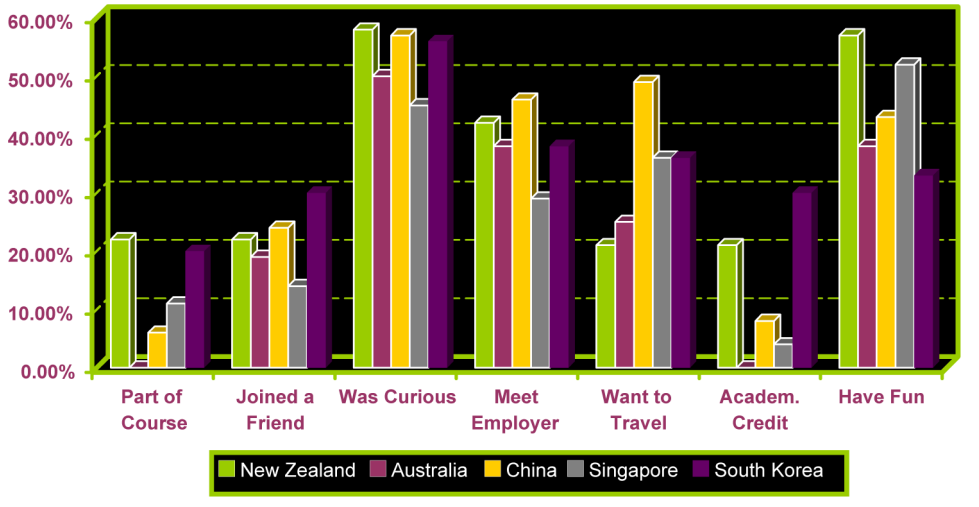

Figure 1. Why did you join the SIFE program ($n = 305$)

We note that an insignificant number of responses were given in favor of participation for academic benefits (exception South Korea, where close to 30% of the students were interested in academic credit for their efforts). We conclude the participants see value in this action-learning program, which transcends the attractions of traditional educational approaches.

Consistently throughout the five countries, students expect to make friends (significant in China, where 'Guangxi', the building of lasting relationships, is considered a superior accomplishment), to develop new skills and to meet potential employers through the executives who either mentor the students or attend competitions to select the best outcomes (Figure 2). Those goals appear to be more long-term, while the

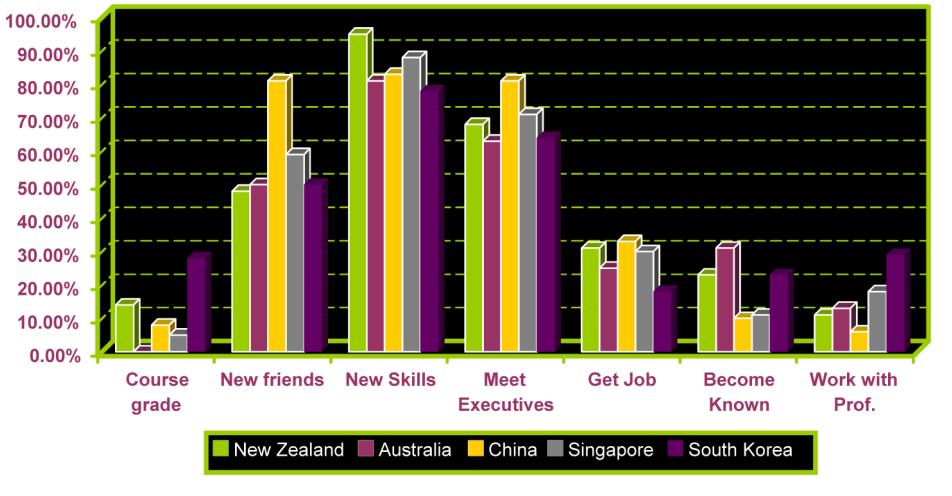

Figure 2. What were your expectations? ($n = 305$)

short-term goals of getting a job, becoming known and working more with academics or focusing on a better grade, all ranked significantly lower in the students' replies.

We conclude that such an action-learning program has the potential to focus students on long-range outcomes, rather than the immediate course-based accomplishments commonly associated with traditional in-class education.

Less than 25% of students invested less than 300 hours per year in this action-learning work, while an equal amount spent more than 1000 hours a year on the same work (Figure 3). The majority of participants gave up between 300 and 1000 hours per year of their time. Given the fact that no academic credit is available for this work, this appears to be a remarkable commitment by students, and we wonder which alternative academic activity would generate such a committed following of the students.

The investment in hours is confirmed by the appreciation for the importance of this work (Figure 4). The vast majority of all respondents, consistent throughout five countries, reported they considered their work either 'quite important' or 'very important'. We conclude that something in this action-learning program attracted the students' passion to a remarkable extent, and as entrepreneurship educations we wonder which other offerings to our students could possibly yield such a high level of interest among undergraduate students. . . .

With the sole exception of Australian students, of which nearly 20% indicated little learning (and we must refer back to the comparatively small sample size), the vast majority of participants in all countries indicated more than 'a little' learning (Figure 5). Approximately 50% of the students reported 'a lot' of learning outcome from their work.

With the exception of China (where 45% of the students indicated their expectations were 'somewhat' met), nearly 60% of participants indicated their expectations were either 'largely met' or 'exceeded' (Figure 6). When reviewing the narrative comments of the Chinese students, a large group of those who 'only' reported their

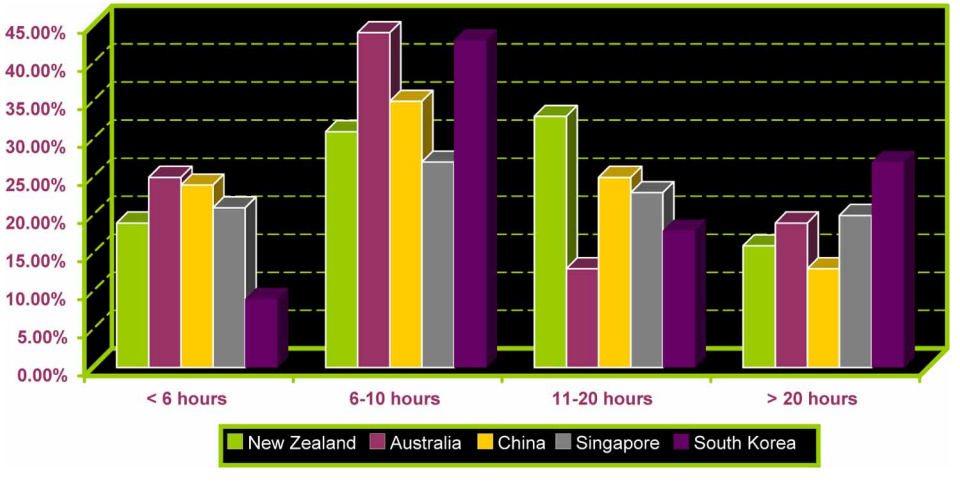

Figure 3. How many hours did you spend on the work? ($n = 305$)

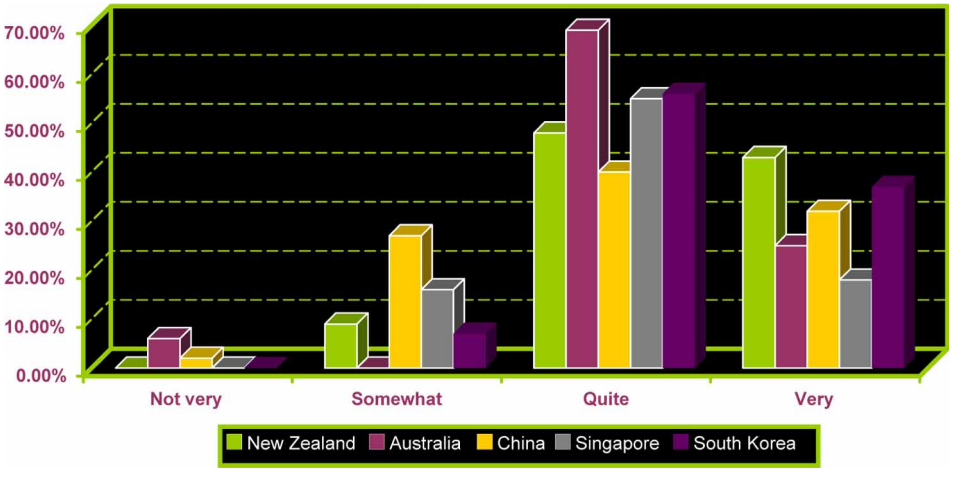

Figure 4. How important was this action-learning work to you? ($n = 305$)

expectations were somewhat met, did so apparently out of disappointment that their team did not win the title as National Champion and thus did not advance to the world event in Toronto.

Especially encouraging is the response from South Korean students, as this is the first year that these students participated in this specific program. We conclude that even in a first year effort, significant satisfaction rates can be achieved.

Faculty members report positive learning outcomes for the students, with new employment-related skills generated. They rank 'entrepreneurship' generally as being of high importance to their countries and their universities (Mueller & Gore, 2005) and compare the SIFE experience favorably with other student

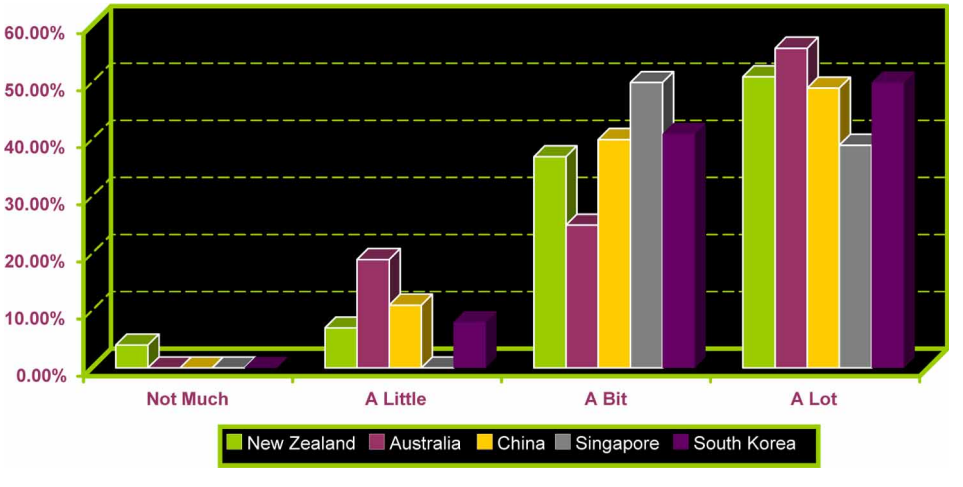

Figure 5. How much did you learn? ($n = 305$)

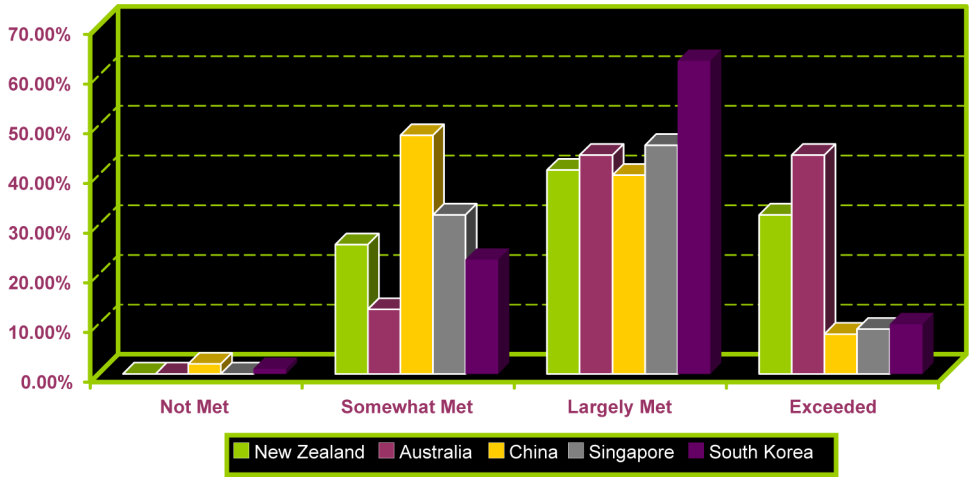

Figure 6. To what extent where your expectations met? ($n = 305$)

activities, such as business plan competitions (Figure 7). When compared to business plan competitions, more than 54% of the faculty felt that SIFE was a 'more' or 'much more' effective program likely because of the practical hands-on features of the SIFE program. The authors, having participated in many of business plan competitions, interpret this as a mandate to consider student activities where managerial training can be applied through hands-on work rather than in an abstract speculative fashion.

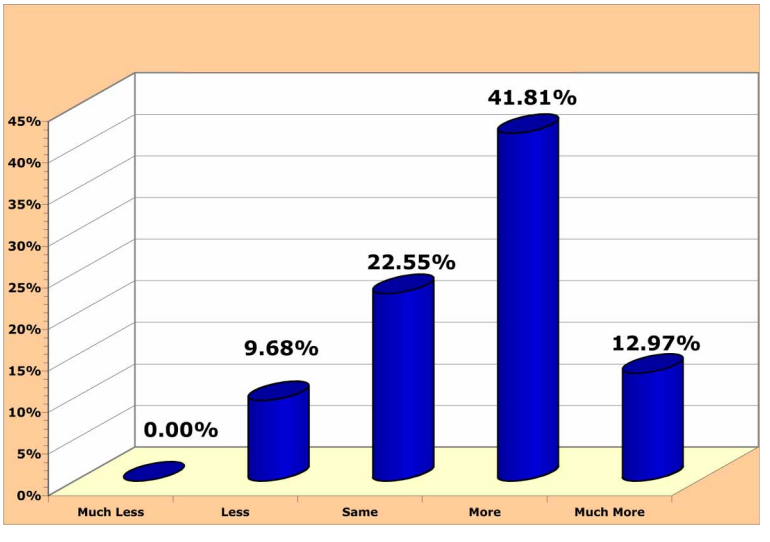

Figure 7. SIFE comparison to other competitions (i.e. business plan)

This effort supports the PETE model (Mueller & Thornton, 2005; Figure 8) by creating a sense of:

- *Belonging* by creating a committed and motivated sub-group of students with a special group membership in an organization;
- *Challenging* the students to practical work outside the classrooms and requiring significant personal commitment to achieve acceptable outcomes;
- Including a real-life *competition* in front of senior corporate executives of world-class corporations;
- *Connecting* students to the corporate environment before they leave university;
- Creating a *signal* effect among other universities, academic mentors and students (and, as they indicated in the responses, also among their friends);
- Producing a *sustainable* community benefit, which educates the performing students as well.

The involvement of mentors in this action-learning program is one of innovation from both an organizational and educational perspective. At the heart of the program is a team of multinational CEOs and Presidents who can expose participants to the 'real world' and offer practical assistance (including financial support) and advice to the ongoing assignment issues of SIFE.

We have polled more than 25 senior executives in these five countries, from companies such as Unilever, HSBC, Philip Morris, Wal-Mart, Metro, KPMG, Bayer, Asahi Shimbun, etc. These senior executives comment positively on the quality they have seen when the students present their materials. Two of these comments are shown below, and are suitably representative:

> KPMG is proud to have been a founding supporter of SIFE in China. With the expansion to more than 30 teams this year, we are excited about the many new Chinese students who have participated in SIFE. The ability to develop, deliver, measure and manage projects is essential for successful business leaders and I am delighted to see the growth of SIFE in China introducing more and more future business leaders to the skills required to be successful in both local and global organizations. (Paul Kennedy, Partner, KPMG Hong Kong and former Managing Partner, KPMG Shanghai)
>
> Wal-Mart is a fast-growing company and committed to sustainable global business and people development. Wherever we are, we see SIFE students participating in important community work. They educate our communities about business opportunities, and we

Figure 8. The PETE approach to effective action learning in business schools

congratulate them for their efforts. We also welcome you to join in our team with your passionate interests, so that you can grow with us. (Joe Hatfield, President & CEO, Wal-Mart Asia)

We at Cargill are delighted to support the development of a new SIFA chapter in NE China. We look forward to the growth of SIFE in Northeast China where many of our agricultural based businesses operate. We anticipate that the students from the targeted Northeast Universities will create a number of projects that will benefit the rural residents of Northeast China. (Norwell Coquillard, President-Greater China, Cargill)

I am amazed by the enthusiasm and quality of the young people that participate in SIFE. Their projects are typically innovative and bring value to the communities and environments in which they operate. The business exposure they gain through SIFE certainly positions the students well for their future careers. (Andrew Thompson, Director, Global Markets, KPMG Hauzhan)

Summary

The willingness of the students to engage in this action-learning effort and to invest significant amounts of time indicates the attraction a practically relevant and outcome-oriented program has for them. The achievements are more than what would be reached in traditional academic settings, but we cannot yet report on the long-term effects of the program for students or their community clients. Cultural differences exist between the results of this program in these five countries, and more work is required to identify which parts of this effort can be modified for cultural adaptations.

As educators, we marvel at the significant involvement of senior corporate leaders, who make personal time available to interact with the students to measure project outcomes and effectiveness. Anecdotal evidence points to several immediate job offers for these students by the participating firms, but more work is required to determine whether this effort is an effective job search and career start program.

Notes on contributors

Jens Mueller (www.muellerjens.com) is Associate Professor for Entrepreneurship and Strategy at Waikato Management School in Hamilton, New Zealand. His global research, leading several multi-university research clusters in the areas of governance, sustainability and innovative staff engagement practices, focuses on the development of sustainable enterprises with advanced governance structures. Jens publishes extensively in refereed journals, is the editor of the *Asia Journal of Entrepreneurship and Sustainability* (www.asiaentrepreneurshipjournal.com), and teaches MBA participants at several premier universities worldwide.

David HanJun Hu is the professor of the School of Economics in Fudan University of Shanghai, China and the visiting scholar in Business School of Oxford University and Aston University. His research and teaching interests lie in the areas of international trade, international financing, multinational investment. His recent works and papers include *WTO and Foreign Trade in China* (2004), *Analysis on Factors of Influencing FDI Regional Distribution in China* (2005), *Welfare Standard on Environmental Economy Research* (2005), and *R&D Investment-Choice of Strategic Trade Policy in China* (2005).

John Thornton University of South Australia, Adelaide, China. John is an academic and former Students in Free Enterprise Australia Fellow from the University of South Australia. He manages SIFE Australia's day-to-day operations from the University's Flexible Learning Centre. John

has been the co-author of the Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Evaluation (PETE) model, which has been widely published as groundbreaking work to establish action learning for entrepreneurship students.

Tan Wee Liang is Associate Professor of Management at Singapore's Singapore Management University, where he coordinates the SMU Management Group. He is the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Enterprising Culture* and is a member of the editorial board of several other refereed journals. He is the Chief Facilitator in the Asian Productivity Organization Forums on the Development of National Productivity Organizations in Bangkok (2001), Teheran (2002), Danang, Vietnam (2003) and Fiji (2004) and a reviewer for Strategic and Operations Management of the International Qualifying Scheme of the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (UK).

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