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Design and Management of Higher Education Trans-National Education (TNE) Provision: Ten Lessons from an Action Research Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide insight for the design and management of Higher Education **Trans-National Education (**TNE) provision. The guidance is experientially based and generated from an action research study utilising empirical survey findings relating to a long-standing TNE programme involving a UK university and a Chinese partner university. The paper identifies a number of lessons for TNE provision but especially important are the need to form a strong relationship with the partner institution, acculturate the students from the start of the programme and the key role of the formal induction programme once they arrive in the UK. The findings of this study should constitute lessons for senior managers and course managers involved in designing and managing TNE programmes at UK universities. The main limitation of the study is its focus on just one TNE programme and, hence the generalisability of the findings, but it does make an original contribution to knowledge in terms of the successful operation of a TNE programme.

Keywords: Trans-National Education (TNE); Action Research; International education; China

1.0 Introduction

Students who seek an education in a foreign country are, in fact, carrying on a rich tradition that extends back many centuries (Furnham, 2004). In a wider sense, transitions between different cultural communities has been chronicled and included in myths and legends since the early stages of civilisation (Chirkov, 2009). However, international education is not without its challenges relating to cultural differences and adaptation (Shafaei and Razak, 2016; Baklashova and Kazakov, 2016), cross-cultural management (Li et al, 2016), differences in language and accents (Acar, 2016), different learning styles and participation (Straker, 2016), and diverse national standards (Hefferman et al, 2010; Hill et al, 2014). Nevertheless, for HEIs engaging in international education, these issues, are usually perceived to be outweighed by the concomitant benefits, as it can produce increased revenue, enhanced global profile, and a strengthened international reputation for a university (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014.) Furthermore, students who travel can benefit from good quality education (Lin, 2006) and all students, domestic as well as international, benefit from an enriched educational experience (Luo and Jamieson-Drake, 2013) arising from the development of intercultural competencies and a broadened perspective (QAA, 2015).Moreover, in a rapidly globalising world (Eken et al, 2014; Wild et al, 2010) Sip (2014) postulates that the international perspective is an absolute necessity to overcome issues associated with nationalism and the trend to travel overseas in order to study has become known as 'educational tourism' (Sotikova et al, 2016). Indeed, of the 2,266,075 students enrolled on Higher Education courses in the UK during 2014/15, 437,352 (19.3%) were from overseas (HESA, 2016). This was a significant increase from 1998/99 when the total number of students enrolled on Higher Education courses in the UK stood at 1,845,757 and just 219,285 (11.9%) were from overseas (Ramsden, 2009).

For individuals who opt to study abroad the implications can be literally life-changing and all those involved in the process need to take their responsibilities very seriously (Spencer-Oatey, 2004). It is gratifying, therefore, that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reports that most UK universities are aware of this responsibility as well as the magnitude of the issues involved, and have adopted strategic approaches to the provision of support for overseas students (QAA, 2008). In addition, while there are complex and wide-ranging issues relating to foreign students and international study (Altbach, 1989), the importance of the subject has led to considerable research in to overseas students and the aim of this paper is to add to this body of knowledge by reporting the findings of a longitudinal study relating to a long-standing Trans-National Education (TNE) programme involving a UK university and a Chinese partner university. To begin, however, it is useful to consider TNE in the broader context.

2.0 Trans-National Education

Trans-National Education (TNE) is defined as "the delivery of programmes overseas by a parent institution either operating directly or in association with an international partner" (Stafford and Taylor, 2016) and it has dramatically changed in scope and scale over the last decade (Knight, 2016). In the UK, higher education institutions now offer a multitude of transnational education programmes through a diverse and complex range of modes of delivery (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014), these forms of TNE include overseas campus's, franchising, dual and joint awards, flying faculty, and distance learning (Robinson et al, 2016; Tang and Nollent, 2007; Smith, 2014 and QAA, 2013; Knight, 2016). This expansion means that for many UK universities TNE is now a major component of their international strategy and the international students that are recruited via this route are seen as important educational *assets* (QAA, 2015).

Although changes in the socio-economic situation of host countries, along with changing university priorities, mean that every year in the UK some TNE initiatives are terminated (eg Robinson et al, 2016) in recent years a much larger number of new TNE initiatives have been launched which means that there has been rapid growth in TNE provided by UK universities (Hill et al, 2014). In 2012 TNE generated approximately £496m for UK universities (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014) and public bodies such as JISC (JISC, 2017) have undertaken investment in infrastructure to permit further future growth. In practice many TNE initiatives are focused on *business and management*, (Siora et al, 2016) which is not impacted by geography to the same extent as many other subjects, and which is, therefore, more suitable for TNE programmes which typically involve host universities in South-East Asia in general and China in particular (Robinson et al, 2016).

Indeed, having recognised inherent weaknesses in its own Higher Education system China has developed what) a strong conviction to transform its higher education system (Mok and Han, 2016), and one of the main mechanisms for this transformation is TNE. Support for TNE in China has been provided by the *2010-2020 Mid and Long-Term China Education Reform and Development Plan* published in 2010 as well as inclusion of TNE in Premier Li Keqiang's list of priority areas and industries for China (HEFCE, 2014). So while Chinese regulation is *onerous* (British Council, 2013), China is supportive of TNE as a means of capacity-building especially with regard to the professional development of teaching and research staff (British Council, 2013). There are now more than 1,000 TNE programmes formally registered with the Chinese Ministry of Education and that 800 of these are based on undergraduate courses and with 25% of these involve UK universities (HEFCE, 2014b) it would appear that UK universities are often a partner of choice.

With international collaboration and overseas students demonstrably so important to UK universities and TNE the preferred form of international engagement for many, it would seem apposite to consider some of the lessons learnt from a long-standing and successful TNE collaboration between Harper Adams University (HAU) and Beijing University of Agricultural (BUA) that was initially established with the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement in March 2004. The TNE collaboration is based on two courses: BSc / BSc (Hons) International Business Management and BSc / BSc (Hons) Food Quality and Retail Management which have now collectively produced around 740 graduates. The structure of the two courses is very similar (see Figure 1) and is based on a 3+1 model (ie 3 years are delivered in China and one year is delivered in the UK). The entire four-year programme is formally recognised by the Chinese Ministry of Education while years 1-3 constitute the HAU validated course.. Students who meet all the normal entry criteria for HAU relating to academic attainment, language proficiency and visa requirements may transfer to HAU at the end of Year 2 so that they may study for the final year at HAU. Students who do not meet the entry requirements complete their studies on other courses at BUA. The Year 1 and 2 modules are delivered in China by BUA staff supported by a HAU Link Tutor and online material that is made available via a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). In addition selected modules receive direct teaching input from HAU through the use of flying faculty. The modules supported by flying faculty change year-on-year to reflect student need, staff availability, and a desire to keep the curriculum fresh. The program received a very positive review by the QAA in 2012 (QAA, 2012).

FIGURE 1 – ABOUT HERE

3.0 Methodology

The overall approach to the research was *action research as a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives* (Stringer, 2014)*"*. Unlike more traditional approaches to research it seeks to combine an understanding of specific complex situations with transformational action through intervention of the reasearcher. It is particularly relevant to the professional practitioner who has a desire to improve their own practice (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and so it is becoming increasingly popular as a method of enquiry in professions such as education (McNiff, 2013; McCoy, 2015; Keskin and Kuzu, 2015; Norton, 2009; Dajani, 2015). The general approach involves the action research practitioner in planning, acting, observing and reflecting (McNiff, 2013) or some similar cycle (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014) and in many instances where the cycle is repeated the process is referred to as either a *spiral* of cycles (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014) or a *sequence* of cycles (McNiff, 2013).

In the context of this study, preliminary research undertaken to investigate apparent *culture shock* (Lysgaard, 1955) in the early days of the TNE collaboration identified various issues which required attention and so the work was quickly reframed within the *action research* paradigm. A questionnaire was developed from the literature on acculturation as well as discussions with staff and students, and since 2007 this has been completed by all students on the two courses four times during their final year of study in the UK. The data generated by this regular surveying of students is used to identify issues which are then addressed as soon as possible in order to achieve increasing levels of student satisfaction. It is tempting to think of each year or cohort as being the action research cycle but this would be inaccurate as the cycle is actually completed with each and every survey round.

It is particularly interesting to note how the results obtained from the first survey of the first cohort of students differs from the first survey of the latest cohort and so comparative data for selected variables relating to induction, integration and learning is presented in Table 1. The data is collected on a six point scale where 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree, and 6 = No Opinion. A mean score has been derived for each cohort on each variable after No Opinion and missing data has been accounted for. A Difference score between the two means for each variable has then been computed to establish the magnitude of the change in scores between September 2007 and September 2015. With these Difference scores a positive means that there is increased agreement with the statement and a negative means that there is less agreement.

TABLE 1 – ABOUT HERE

4.0 Results

The biggest improvement on criterion survey relates to the *helpfulness of BUA* and this may very well underpin many of the improvements perceived by the students. Indeed, as time has progressed BUA has gained significant experience of TNE and actively sought to build capability to the point now where many of the staff, HAU as well as BUA, consider that preparation to study in the UK really begins for the students right at the start of the programme and that everything that the students are asked to engage with, from the teaching programme, through the assignments and even the teaching provided by the flying faculty, is designed with this in mind.

It is apparent that the 2015 cohort agree more strongly with the statements that the two week induction period was both *good* and *valuable*. This would suggest that there has been an improvement in the student induction possibly because there has been a concomitant increase in the amount of information provided and this is reflected in the improved scores regarding *what to expect of the British*, *finance*, *accommodation*, *careers*, *doctors*, and *insurance* as well as knowing *where to get non-academic advice* and the *support provided by the Students Union*.

It was also clear right at the start of the initiative that while the Chinese students had travelled to the UK with the intention of meeting new people and making friends with them, they were having difficulty integrating with the UK students. While this could be explained to some extent by the challenge of communicating in a foreign language it was apparent that it was also due to their Confucian culture and reserved nature. However, once identified as an issue staff at BUA were encouraged to adopt more of a Western approach to their teaching in order to encourage participation among the students from early days on the programme, and along with the inclusion of overt opportunities for the Chinese students to integrate with UK students during the two week induction, there has been a resultant improvement in

the way that the latest cohort sees opportunities to integrate via *sport* and *social* activities which has meant a significant decrease in those reporting that life at *HAU is boring*.

It is also very interesting to note that there has been a general improvement in student perceptions regarding teaching and learning on the programme. While much of Chinese education, both at school and university, is based on rote learning (Wang and Greenwood, 2015), it is pleasing to note that over time the students on this programme are now more engaged with the Western pedagogic aim of producing *independent thinkers*. They are also much more inclined to acknowledge that *lectures are a good means of teaching*, they *learn a lot in tutorials* (which are not part of the normal Chinese system), they make *regular use of the English language support staff*, and the *lecturers are very helpful*. It is also interesting to note that while some literature (eg Wang and Greenwood, 2015) suggests that Chinese students prefer multiple-choice type assessment and are quite willing to engage in cheating and plagiarism the latest cohort of these students are less inclined toward *multiple choice type questions* and *collusion with their friends* when working on assignments, perhaps reflecting their improved confidence in being involved woth the culture and reduced insecurities regarding their performance. It can only be hypothesised that the work undertaken by the BUA as well as HAU staff in China has inculcated the students with something much more akin to a Western philosophy toward teaching and learning on this programme and prepared them better for their experience.

Finally, and as a result of the changed perceptions identified above it is possible to develop a series of lessons for others involved in the design and management of TNE programmes (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 – ABOUT HERE

5.0 Conclusion

TNE is an important component of many universities internationalisation strategy. It not only generates financial revenue but it provides a means of broadening the perspectives of both students and staff. However, not all TNE initiatives are successful and it is useful to consider key aspects arising from an action research project that focuses on what may be deemed a successful TNE programme. The findings highlight the pre-eminent importance of the institutional relationship, the advantages of acculturating the students as soon as they register on the programme and of the benefits arising from a formal Induction Programme when they arrive in the UK. This research also highlights the importance of monitoring and continuous improvement of TNEs.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1 – Course Structure

Year 0 Taught at BUA in China		Year 1 Taught at BUA in China	Year 2 Taught at BUA in China	Year 3 Taught at HAU in the UK
Chinese curriculum		Module 1(Flying faculty)	Module 1 (Flying faculty)	Module 1: Honours Research Project (HAU)
		Module 2 (Flying faculty)	Module 2 (Flying faculty)	
		Module 3 (Link tutor)	Module 3 (Link tutor)	Module 2 (HAU)
		Module 4 (Link tutor)	Module 4 (Link tutor)	Module 3 (HAU)
		Module 5 (Link tutor)	Module 5 (Link tutor)	Module 4 (HAU)
		Module 6 (Link tutor)	Module 6 (Link tutor)	Module 5 (HAU)
		Module 7 (Link tutor)	Module 7 (Link tutor)	Module 6 (HAU)
		Module 8 (Link tutor)	Module 8 (Link tutor)	Module 7 (HAU)

Figure 2 – Ten Lessons for TNE Design and Management

1   Engage in TNE for the right reasons ie the student's education.

2   Ensure that colleagues at the Partner institution fully understand the operation of the programme by engaging in regular and frequent communication with staff at both universities and encourage academic and support staff visits to the Partner institution to teach, share materials and develop relationships.

3   Be sympathetic to the style of teaching that the students have been exposed to at school but adopt Western teaching practices and provide staff development opportunities at both universities which address teaching and learning issues in cross cultural programmes.

4   Work to prepare the students for coming to the host country from the day they register on the course.

5   Don't underestimate the value of a formal Induction Programme when the students first arrive in the host country.

6   Ensure that the Induction Programme is of sufficient length to allow for the students to properly acclimatise and take-in what is likely to be a large amount of information when they first arrive in the host country.

7   Provide all the necessary information but do so *little-and-often* rather than in one *big hit* that may overwhelm the students to the extent that they simply ignore it. It may also help to provide the information in writing so that the students may return to it later to ensure their understanding.

8   Work closely with the Student Course Representatives as these students will disseminate information to the rest of the cohort. These students are also invaluable in providing guidance and support for the following cohort.

9   Use the relevant social media (eg QQ) to maintain regular communication with the students and also to informally monitor their views and feelings toward the programme

Use a formal system of Action Research to monitor the students and take action to remedy issues as soon as they become apparent.

Table 1 Changes in student experience to Transnational Education experiences 2007- 2015

	Sept 2007		Sept 2015		Difference	t-test
	N	Mean	N	Mean		
Induction						
BUA is very helpful	57	3.23	68	2.13	+1.10	4.20*
The SU is very supportive	52	2.73	70	2.24	+0.49	2.11*
Information on financial support is good	54	2.91	68	2.43	+0.48	1.99*
Information on careers is good	53	3.19	65	2.68	+0.51	1.98*
I know where to get non-academic advice	55	2.85	69	2.33	+0.52	1.96*
I received good information regarding Doctors	49	3.10	66	2.62	+0.48	1.85**
The 2-week induction was good	57	2.32	71	1.89	+0.43	1.76**
The induction period is very valuable	55	2.31	72	1.99	+0.32	1.39
The British are just as I expected before I came	54	2.85	69	2.54	+0.31	1.20
I received poor information regarding insurance	48	2.88	67	3.13	-0.25	-0.96
Information on accommodation is poor	55	3.33	71	3.85	-0.52	-2.08*
Integration						
There are good opportunities to participate in sports at HA	50	3.02	69	2.22	+0.80	3.25*
There are good opportunities to participate in social activities at HA	51	2.84	72	2.14	+0.70	3.01*
Life around HA is boring	56	2.73	69	3.22	-0.49	-1.97*
Learning						
I regularly make use of the English Language support staff at HA	54	2.72	65	2.26	+0.46	2.02*
The main aim of HE should be to teach students to think for themselves	55	2.42	68	2.09	+0.33	1.30
The Lecturers are very helpful	54	2.17	70	1.93	+0.24	1.10
Lectures are a good means of teaching	53	2.21	71	1.97	+0.24	1.04
I learn a lot in tutorials	52	2.44	69	2.22	+0.22	0.97
I am better at multiple choice questions rather than open-ended	56	2.55	68	2.79	-0.24	-0.96
I do not help friends with their assignments	53	3.30	70	3.79	-0.49	-1.95*

* Significant 95%, ** Significant 90%