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CS 7: Collaborative development of an online module concerning employability and entrepreneurship

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Introduction

This case study describes a joint project between the University of Northampton in the English Midlands, and Shaoguan University in South China¹. This project was funded by the China Connect strand of PMI2 which is concerned with employability and entrepreneurship. The recommendations here relate particularly to managing externally-funded projects, and also to the teaching and learning aspects of transnational education. The project aimed to create a jointly-validated training module for students in the UK and China to enable them to develop global entrepreneurship skills and cross-cultural awareness and communication skills. A core project team was created consisting of academic staff and careers advisory staff from both institutions, and further support was obtained from other departments of each institution, including e-learning developers and educational researchers, when necessary. A specific and unusual aspect of the initial concept of this module is that it envisaged that the course participants must form collaborative online working groups consisting of students from the two institutions sharing materials and working together.

Key learnings up front

- **CS 7.1.** It is advisable to begin a project with a team-building stage, as before submitting a bid for external funding, or before getting institutional support for a new collaboration, it is necessary to have a team which from the outset will possess the necessary competences for a successful project.
- **CS 7.2.** It is essential for project team members to have a degree of passion for the project, including a willingness to engage in

¹ <http://www.globalentrepreneurs.co.uk/>

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preliminary stages without any certainty of ensuring funding or getting institutional approval.

- **CS 7.3.** It is advantageous to develop the project or collaboration from an existing relationship between the two institutions, and from existing friendships and sharing of interests amongst the staff of the two sides.
- **CS 7.4.** It is advantageous if the team members have – prior to creating the proposal or at an early stage of the collaboration – their own direct experience on the ground of the other institution.
- **CS 7.5.** It is desirable for team members to be established members of networks relating to the collaboration, for example networks concerning employability and careers guidance.
- **CS 7.6.** It is essential on international projects and collaborations to take time to work through differences. Each step may need repeated clarification and negotiation; the ability to be able to appreciate the perspectives of other team members, in other situations, needs time to emerge.
- **CS 7.7.** It is necessary to give as much attention to the process which the collaboration will entail as is given to the product which the collaboration will achieve. It has been shown in cross-cultural projects in any domain that a strict *target-oriented* approach, that is attempting to force through and impose the preferred solutions of any individual or of one party, is likely to jeopardise success no matter how expert this solution is.
- **CS 7.8.** It is essential to work with a spirit of mutuality in every aspect and every step of a project. If aspects of the collaboration are not considered suitable by any of the stakeholders concerned (including managers, students, and staff) it risks failing.
- **CS 7.9.** It is essential to explore the different expectations of teachers and students concerning what are valid approaches to teaching and learning.
- **CS 7.10.** It is necessary to address differences in the two institutions' operations and strategies, for example relating to issues of validation and quality assurance.
- **CS 7.11.** It is necessary, for collaborations concerning employability, to explore cultural differences in expectations of employers concerning employability competences, evidence, and how institutions are expected to assist students in finding employment.
- **CS 7.12.** It is necessary, for collaborations involving elearning, to research the different experiences, skills, and expectations of staff,

(including academic staff and e-learning developers), concerning use of virtual learning environments (VLEs). This may identify training and development needs.

- **CS 7.13.** It is necessary, for projects expecting collaborative learning, and involving students from two different communities of practice in relation to use of Web 2.0 applications, to research differences in social networking applications commonly used in the two settings.
- **CS 7.14.** It is desirable to have some team members who are familiar with the language and culture of both partners in a collaboration; these can be a resource to scaffold the understanding of other team members.
- **CS 7.15.** It is important to establish and share a complete vision of what the project is trying to achieve, and to practise explaining this clearly and succinctly to people who are outside the team.
- **CS 7.16.** It is essential to establish clear communication channels, not only considering technical aspects of communication such as emailing, file sharing, and online discussions, but also to allow time for reflection and translation.
- **CS 7.17.** It is desirable, as in this project, to appoint a bilingual research assistant to ensure that opinions of stakeholders are accurately gathered and incorporated into the emerging plan.
- **CS 7.18.** It is essential to build bridges with other staff and departments within your own institution, as the collaboration might be seen to be trespassing in areas of responsibility of other departments. To be successful it is necessary to recruit these as friends as, for example, issues such as validation will require their endorsement.
- **CS 7.19.** It is essential to liaise with senior management at an early stage as any project or collaboration will involve issues of resourcing. If possible get someone in a senior position to be a sponsor or champion of the vision you have. If you are bidding for project funding from external sources, this will usually require the signed endorsement of the head of the institution.
- **CS 7.20.** It is recommended that project teams should consult the Global People website http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople/ which was itself developed as a result of a much larger collaboration of UK and Chinese universities. In particular the Life Cycle Model: '*a guide for those planning, managing or reviewing a project or partnership.*'

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- **CS 7.21.** It is necessary to have a detailed plan of the stages the project will follow, however it is recommended to adopt, as far as possible, and as far as the project funding body allows, a 'Sliding Planning Window' approach to project management. This is a recognition that overly strict adherence to an established plan will prevent a flexible response to changes, (opportunities as well as threats), which will always occur in any project.
- **CS 7.22.** It is necessary, in collaborations relying on elearning, to carry out a complete technical audit as a whole range of technical issues may need to be addressed to ensure that the online materials are accessible in all the locations, ranging from bandwidth problems to download materials and quality of headphones to enable students to listen to podcasts clearly.

Background

This project relates to several of the themes which are emerging concerning the internationalisation of higher education including: growth of transnational education (TNE); growth of e-learning; growth of collaborative partnerships; emphasis both on internationalisation-at-home and internationalisation abroad; staff development; intercultural communication; institutional strategy; and the development of students as globalised citizens.

This case study will illustrate the steps taken to achieve the stated aims of the project, which were:

For the *students* to develop:

- Cross-cultural communication skills.
- Knowledge of the business environment of other countries.
- Entrepreneurship competences for the globalised world.
- The ability to work with partners of different cultures.

For the *project team members* to experience:

- Cross-cultural educational collaboration and development of new pedagogic skills.
- Interaction with students in different cultures.

For the *two universities* to achieve:

- Mutual collaboration.
- The development of employable and enterprising citizens.

- Networks concerning entrepreneurship with other universities, government/provincial agencies, and employers in both China and the UK.

There are many facets to this project, but the specific problem which this case study addresses is about the process necessary for the development of *mutual* learning partnerships, which is a stated aspiration of PMI2² and which was agreed by the project team at an early stage to be the keystone to the project's success. Put simply, even if elaborate teaching materials were written and an attractive and an up-to-date virtual learning environment was produced, this in itself could not be a guarantee of success. If *any* aspects of the module were not considered suitable by *any* of the stakeholders concerned (including managers, students, and staff) for *any* reason at all (including different expectations of what form the learning activities should take, or lack of conviction concerning the suitability of the learning approaches incorporated into the course materials, or issues relating to acceptability and accessibility of social networking tools) then the materials simply would not be used and the ultimate aims of the project would not be achieved.

Hence it was decided early on that each stage of the project should involve initially researching differences of expectations, then having open discussions about any differences found, followed by jointly developing ways of bridging these differences, and then piloting of the solutions which had been devised. Hence the project team set out to seek ways to exploit the differences between expectations in the two settings in order to create a series of bridges to enable differences to be transformed into synergies.

Key issues

It has been shown in cross-cultural projects in any domain that a strict *target-oriented* approach, that is attempting to force through and impose the preferred solutions of any individual or of one party, is likely to jeopardise success no matter how expert this solution is. It is necessary to accommodate the expectations of all stakeholders involved to ensure success. What is described here, therefore, is the *process-oriented* approach which was taken, which involved all aspects of the collaboration and which, it is suggested, might offer lessons which can be transferrable to other collaborative educational projects. This case study will therefore record *how* the project was developed rather than details of *what* the

2 <http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-pmi2.htm>

project actually produced (for example details of the course materials which were developed, or detailed description of the technical aspects of the VLE which was created). More details are on the project website³.

Some of the dimensions of the project which involved recognising and then reconciling differences include:

- as an example of transnational education (TNE) it was necessary to address differences in the two institutions' operations and strategies for example relating to issues of validation and quality assurance;
- as an example of an initiative relating to employability it was necessary to explore differences in expectations of employers in the two countries concerning employability competences, how these can be evidenced, and how institutions assist students in finding employment;
- as an example of collaborative course development it was necessary to address differences in the expectations of teachers in the two cultures of learning concerning what they believe to be appropriate methods of learning, teaching, and assessment;
- as an example of a course involving cross-cultural communities of learners it was necessary to address the differences in the students' expectations of learning materials and learning styles;
- as an example of e-learning it was necessary to research the different experiences, skills, and expectations of staff, (including academic staff and e-learning developers), concerning use of virtual learning environments (VLEs);
- as an example of collaborative learning involving students from two emerging and different communities of practice in relation to use of Web 2.0 applications it involved researching differences in social networking applications in the two settings.

This case-study: what was done.

Before bidding

Before being able to submit a bid for funding it was necessary to build a team which from the outset would possess the necessary competences for a successful project. This team-building stage, and the subsequent bid-writing stage, necessarily takes place before any funding is received. Hence this is itself an entrepreneurial activity, because success, even for a well-prepared and well-written bid, cannot be assured and hence this involves a willingness to take risks. It is unlikely that institutions will be

³ <http://www.globalentrepreneurs.co.uk/>

able to fund this form of speculative activity to any large extent in the form of remission from other duties; hence the first essential competence for project team members is a sharing of passion, a willingness to engage in these preparatory stages without any certainty that the project will actually come about.

In this case several fortuitous factors coincided to enable staff from the two institutions to share interests and hence rapidly to come to a shared vision of what a suitable project could achieve. It is important to note that the details of this project hence emerged from a top-down vision which then was broken down into the components and stages which would be necessary to realise the vision. The factors were:

- An existing relationship between the two institutions, including a Memorandum of Understanding, which had involved previous visits of staff in both directions. The two academics who became the lead managers of the project in the two institutions, both Chinese, had met on such a visit when a delegation of Shaoguan senior staff visited Northampton, and they then established both friendship and a sharing of interests.
- The lead manager from Shaoguan University was already heavily involved in business planning competitions in Guangdong, which is a prime method of developing entrepreneurship skills in Chinese universities.
- There were existing movements of students from Shaoguan to Northampton, some as visiting students and some who were progressing onto top-up or Masters Degrees. Shaoguan academic staff, when visiting Northampton, kept in touch with these students and hence were familiar with the academic practices there.
- Another Northampton academic who would become part of the team had visited Shaoguan several times to deliver short courses and lectures, hence was familiar with the university and the academic practices there.
- This academic was simultaneously involved with activities run by East Midlands Universities International Careers Adviser Working Group, which is a coalition of Careers and Advisory services of the universities in the East Midlands, and had conducted research into employers' attitudes towards employability of international students and graduates, and as a result was keen to be involved with schemes to develop cross-cultural employability competences.
- The head of the careers service at the University of Northampton is a lead member of the East Midlands Universities International

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Careers Adviser Working Group, and was keen to find out more about employment practices in China, and how Chinese university careers services operate.

- Northampton Business School has an established reputation relating to the development of entrepreneurs, as well as a team of e-learning developers with experience in producing online materials to support training materials. Hence there was technical expertise to draw upon.

The vision which emerged during this initial stage of team building was for an online module which would involve students from the two universities working together in collaborative groups in a series of activities which would develop entrepreneurial skills and cross cultural awareness and communication. It was felt that this would necessarily be an online course, and that the medium of instruction and interaction would be in English.

The bid for funding included a detailed plan of the stages the project team intended to follow, and the following section of this case study will describe how this plan was implemented (and at times was amended) in order to produce such a course. The team found, in fact, that in some aspects the initial plan needed to be flexible so adopted a 'Sliding Planning Window' approach and asked permission of the funders to allow them more time to complete certain activities. This will be expanded upon later in this case study.

Activities undertaken and outputs in the first six months

Projects such as this will inevitably require the project team to involve other staff and departments within an institution, and indeed unless this is done at an early stage, and with a degree of diplomacy, the project team might be seen to be trespassing in areas of responsibility of others. Hence initially the team needed to carry out internal consultation with other stakeholders including students, senior managers, and Careers Services within the two institutions. During this period the existing channels and resources of enhancing employability and entrepreneurship within the two institutions were explored. The team also investigated the validation procedures and the existing Virtual Learning Environments within the two institutions.

Following this internal groundwork, during which there had been frequent communication particularly between the lead managers, a project workshop to enable face-to-face communication was held in Shaoguan in June 2009. In preparation for this visit the Northampton team had spent a

half-day doing activities on the 'Global People Life Cycle Model'⁴, which is particularly useful for international projects with participants from different cultures. This provided them with guidance on the whole life cycle of an intercultural project from the planning stage through to completion and dissemination activities, and this helped to identify the core activities and the underpinning intercultural competences required at each stage of the project. This also allowed them to propose an agenda for activities during the forthcoming workshop in order to incorporate some of the critical features which have been identified earlier in this case study, including the following needs:

- To take time, for example for translation and reflection, rather than to impose solutions.
- To establish friendships via social activities.
- To seek mutual contributions and to welcome different perspectives.
- To allow breakout activities where the teams separated according to their speciality, e.g. to meet with employers, and to meet with the IT staff of the university.
- To meet and establish relationships with senior managers of the other university.

On the final day of the visit the project team reached agreement on the objectives of the project and its learning outcomes, identifying how cross-cultural skills and entrepreneurial competencies (which are linked to employability) could be combined as two intertwined key threads of the training materials and activities for students. They also reviewed and examined a number of key issues including: the VLE systems; the communication channels between project members; the project website; project dissemination in both countries; and the structure of the students' experiential activities.

It would be easy to gloss this as a completely successful meeting of minds, but later when the two sides started to share proposed teaching materials it was found that there were still substantially different perspectives. To describe this briefly, the Chinese teachers were placing a greater emphasis on lengthy input materials for the students to read, whilst the UK teachers were placing a greater emphasis on application activities for the students to engage with. However, as a result of the working relationships which had been established during the visit, it was possible to merge these two approaches so as to produce materials acceptable to both sets of teachers.

⁴ http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople/

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Also during this period several publicity activities were carried out, internally within the two institutions in teaching and learning publications and conferences, and externally by presenting at the Association of Graduate Careers Advisers (AGCAS) Biennial Conference, submitting for the Annual ARG Awards, and close consultation with stakeholders including the East Midlands Development Agency and the East Midlands Universities International Careers Adviser Working Group in the UK, and the Research Society of Modern Management of Guangdong Province, the Research Society of Value Engineering of HEI in Guangdong Province, and the Marketing Administration Academy of Shaoguan in China.

Activities undertaken and outputs in the second six months

Following the workshop held in Shaoguan the teams started to produce the module learning materials and tasks. This, as explained earlier, revealed that further discussion was necessary to align the expectations of staff from the two universities. Although this was easily resolved the team began to realise that the initial timetable they had produced might require amending. When the team had written a substantial part of the course materials the e-learning developers in Northampton converted a selection of these into e-learning objects so that piloting of the module could begin.

A second face-to-face workshop was held in early March with the Shaoguan team visiting Northampton. During this the team carried out the first stage of piloting of the training modules which had been developed, and so achieved a deeper mutual understanding of important issues which would have significant impact on the delivery of the module including IT issues; the structure of the training materials; and the level and types of material. The project team disseminated the project aims and activities when they met senior managers of the University of Northampton and other external stakeholders including East Midlands Development Agency, Career Services East Midlands Group, and Northamptonshire County Council.

A further issue which emerged during this period related to an aspect of e-learning which the project team had not initially envisaged. They had anticipated in their early plans that there might be issues concerning compatibility of the two universities VLEs, but they had not anticipated a cultural issue relating to choice of social networking tools. Put simply (as this issue will be dealt with at more length in a research article on this

topic⁵) the team discovered that Chinese young people were using different social networking platforms than those mostly used by students in the UK:

There is a rapid growth and high rate of use of internet social networking in China: Godula et al (2009) report that there are around 300 million internet users in China, with 200 million under 29. A key feature is the low usage of non-Chinese platforms such as Facebook compared with the dominance of Chinese platforms such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) which allows anonymous postings, Qzone which is aimed primarily at teenagers, Kaixin001 which added 30 million mostly white-collar users in one year, and Xiaonei which has around 40 million student users. Liu & Zoninsein (2007) state that 'a different kind of Internet culture is emerging in China - younger, more devoted, more addicted to speed and intimacy than its Western counterparts,' and also that 'Chinese also seem to be more likely than Americans to use the Web to share and form opinions'. Within education, Kang & Song (2007) report rapid growth leading to estimates of 10.54 million e-Learners in China for 2007. (Burnapp and Zhao 2009)

It was therefore recognised that it would be necessary to carry out further research in order to choose suitable social networking platforms to enable the interactivity on which the module was premised. The team believes strongly that academic interventions should, as outlined in 'The UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education' be based on research. Plans were therefore made to send an e-learning developer and a Chinese research assistant to Shaoguan to further explore this. Projects such as these require a comprehensive technical audit to assess a whole range of technical issues to ensure that the online materials are accessible, ranging from bandwidth availability to download materials and quality of headphones to enable students to listen to podcasts clearly. Whilst in China they will at the same time to carry out the second stage of piloting of the training materials and the VLE.

Future Plans

At the time of writing⁶ the team have secured funding for a second year during which the piloting and research carried out recently in China will be

⁵ Burnapp, D., Yan, Z., Ahmedmia, O., He, S. and Zhao, W. (2010) Collaborative capacity building: a case study of the development of an on-line module concerning employability and entrepreneurship. Paper presented to: International Association for Development of the Information Society (IADIS) International Conference on International Higher Education, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia, 29 November - 01 December 2010.

⁶ The second year of the project continued as planned, and updates are available on the project website: <http://www.globalentrepreneurs.co.uk/index.htm>

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replicated with students in the UK, followed by a more in-depth stage of piloting which will use collaborative groups from the two institutions following a connected series of the module activities. Any amendments to content and to delivery platforms found necessary by this will then be incorporated into the final module which will then be made available throughout the HE sector.