

Transnational trials, tribulations and translation – Taming the tiger!

Patrick James, Tony Ma, Angus Hooke & Douglas Larden

School of Natural and Built Environments, University of South Australia

At the University of South Australia, in the area of Construction Management and Economics, there has been a very successful model of transnational teaching in the Masters of Project Management (MPM) degree program. This program has been delivered jointly with the Hong Kong Baptist University. Difficulties encountered by the program have included attracting sufficient enrolments due to increased competition, a downturn in the Hong Kong economy and SARS etc, as well as keeping the students informed and content with their learning environment. The School of Natural and Built Environments is now engaging in a plan to deliver multiple transnational programs principally into mainland China. This paper will outline the strategies and actions undertaken in the attempt to grow this transnational activity.

Introduction

In collaboration with the School of Continuing Education (SCE) at Hong Kong Baptist University, the University of South Australia (UniSA) first offered a transnational program in Project Management in Hong Kong in November 1999 to meet the increasing demand for tertiary education, and particularly the strong demand for project management training in Hong Kong.

Project management emerged because of the demand from various stakeholders for the development of new methods of management. Many organisations have perceived that management-by-projects can provide them with powerful tools that improve their ability to plan, implement, and control the activities within the framework of time, cost and quality. Meredith and Mantel (2000 p.11) highlighted that there are three driving forces for adopting project management:

- the exponential expansion of human knowledge;
- the growing demand for a broad range of complex, sophisticated, customized goods and services; and
- the evolution of worldwide competitive markets for the production and consumption of goods and services.

These three forces combine to drive the use of teams to solve problems that used to be solved by individuals. In turn, this leads to the need for a better management system to control both the outcomes and processes. Because of these winds of change, it also leads to the demand for:

- restructuring in managing organisations;
- competent project managers in terms of their academic qualifications, training and assessment; and
- recognition of project management as a distinct profession.

As a result of many more organisations using project management techniques to tackle their business objectives, competent project managers are increasingly in demand and their education and selection has become more important.

As described above, project-based organisational management is but one type of project management, whilst strategic project management is another. This involves putting in place processes and systems that link the project-based organisational activities with the strategic and corporate objectives of the organization. UniSA is also developing these types of less generic project management programs for transnational delivery, but there is not space here to discuss these further.

The transnational project management program in Hong Kong

The Graduate Diploma and Master of Project Management degrees offered in Hong Kong were designed to provide further academic and professional upgrading to individuals who are now working, or planning to work, in the field of project management. The program uses PMI (2000) as a framework and is designed to meet the knowledge requirement of international best practice for project management. The Masters program requires the completion of ten core courses related to project management in a generic mode of study by coursework. Students usually take two years part-time to complete the requirements. Initially there was also a requirement to undertake a project dissertation. The dissertation was later replaced by courses (and a lesson was learnt) because of the difficulty supervising the dissertation at a distance. The Graduate Diploma and Master of Project Management were endorsed by the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM) in April 2002. The program outcomes are knowledge-based and at National Competency Standards for Project Management Level 5. Master courses are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Courses for Master of Project Management

Principles of Project Management	Project Law
Project Procurement	Project Development
Integration, Scope & Risk Management	Human Resources & Communication Management
Time, Cost & Quality Management	Industry-based Project Processes
Project Management Competency & Ethics	Research Techniques in Project Management

Mode of study

Face-to-face classes and seminars are conducted by lecturers from the University of South Australia (UniSA) in Hong Kong, supported by tutorials with local tutors in each course during weekday evenings or Saturday afternoons. Further academic support is provided by means of specially designed learning packages, including a Study Guide and relevant textbook. Students are able to contact UniSA academic staff and project administration officers through emails and the use of a specially designed project management website for communications.

Characteristics of the programs

The program contents are exactly the same as the programs in South Australia, and the characteristics of the programs consist of:

- 16 hours of face to face intensive block teaching by UniSA lecturers in Hong Kong for each course.
- Tutorial support (4 x 2.5 hours) by local tutors.
- Regular support contact made possible by fax and emails with UniSA staff.

- Access to the SCE Resource Library shelved with reference books provided by UniSA.
- Access to the Main Library at Hong Kong Baptist University and remote access for database and e-journals from the UniSA Library.
- Access to the Project Management web site for information & communication.

Assessment

Continuous assessment is typically composed of two assignments and an examination in each of the ten courses. The weighting between assignments and examination is set at the ratio of 50:50. Students who complete the requirements shall be conferred with the award of Graduate Diploma in Project Management or Master of Project Management at graduation ceremonies either held in Adelaide or Hong Kong.

Progress of the programs to date

This program commenced in November 1999. Intakes occur at regular intervals in both June and November of each year. Table 2 below shows the number of students per intake:

Table 2 Intake numbers for Project Management Program with HKBU

Year	Nov 99	Jul 00	Nov 00	Jul 01	Nov 01	Jul 02	Nov 02	Jul 03	Nov 03	Jul 04	Nov 04
Intake	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
No. of students	26	22	37	36	35	18	27	12	21	9	22

These enrolment figures indicate that there is a stable trend demand for the programs even though there have been fluctuations in intake numbers. There was a sudden drop in the 8th intake number in March 2003, due mainly to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) attacking various parts of the world. The syndrome hit Hong Kong residents badly, and affected all aspects of their daily living and business activities. This drop has been difficult to recover given the other issues of more intense competition and a less buoyant economy.

On 3rd and 4th April 2001, the UniSA Quality Assurance Audit Team visited the School of Continuing Education of Hong Kong Baptist University for a quality assessment audit of the above programs. As a result of the visit, the Team was very pleased with the quality of the programs and members were very impressed by the good feedback from students and partners alike. Likewise the report of the UniSA AUQA visit of 2004 provided excellent comments for its transnational program activity in general.

Programs' viability analysis

With the influx of local and overseas postgraduate programs of further studies, prospective students in Hong Kong will be selecting programs based on value for money for their studies and a recognition that the additional academic award will enhance their career development. This is a typical perception of Chinese culture.

The programs are not without their barriers. With the downturn of economies in Hong Kong, and the severe competition against local and overseas universities for similar programs, the immediate impact is their continued viability. This creates a quality issue in that, in good years where the applicants are plenty, the program director can select the best students, whereas in bad years, the director is tempted to accept students with lower qualifications in order to fulfil the viability quota! At the time of writing this paper, our offshore partner indicated to us that

some overseas universities are unable to continue their programs due to insufficient student numbers.

One difficult aspect of a generic program is that the lecturers themselves must be academically sound to teach and deal with students from all sorts of backgrounds. If the content becomes too general, the program will lose its market.

As advised by our collaborating partner, mature Asian students prefer specialisation rather than generalisation. Transnational programs are commercial programs by themselves and one of the main objectives of universities is to provide transnational programs that are commercially sound. To achieve long-term sustainability, quality of the programs must be maintained and there must be value for fees. If the market is saturated with sub-standard postgraduate qualifications, then it adjusts by automatic elimination of sub-standard programs through peer review and public criticism. UniSA's project management programs are still surviving in Hong Kong because of their emphasis on quality delivery.

Transnational expansion into mainland China

Given the successful launch and operation of the Project Management degree programs in conjunction with SCE-HKBU in Hong Kong, and realising the rapidly growing potential market for similar programs in mainland China, a major drive to develop transnational programs there has been ongoing by UniSA since 2002. One of the authors (DL) was head of the School of Geoinformatics, Planning and Building (GPB) in which the Project Management discipline was located, and played a major role in identifying possible partner universities and a range of other postgraduate degree offerings which appeared to be of potential interest. A tour of China with the Pro Vice Chancellor of the Division of Information Technology, Engineering and the Environment (ITEE) occurred in 2003 and the potential partner universities were visited with the assistance of another of the authors (GH) who is a current and long term resident of China, but is also an affiliate Professor in the area of Project Management and Economics at UniSA.

During the visit to mainland China, three potential partners were initially identified in Beijing and following detailed and lengthy discussions and negotiations, three agreements were composed and submitted to the respective Chinese and Australian (UniSA) senior management and international offices for confirmation and signing

The three groups that were chosen to begin the transnational activity were:

1. A Master of Civil Engineering (MCE) program developed as a 50:50 offering jointly with the Beijing Institute of Architecture and Civil Engineering (BICEA). This particular partner was chosen due to close contacts and prior knowledge of the system by a staff member from NBE who did her degree at this institution, was a long term former Beijing resident and retained close ties in research and collegiality with BICEA staff. This NBE staff member is the preferred Program Director for the proposed joint degree. BICEA staff also made reciprocating visits to NBE in Adelaide in 2003.
2. A Master of Logistics and Transport with Beijing Jiaotong University (BJTU) This program developed from close research links between staff of the NBE Transport Systems Centre (TSC) and the Department of Transport Engineering in BJTU, plus further close working relationships and contacts one of the authors (AH). The program was also identified as one of critical need for Chinese and particularly Beijing requirements due to the rapid growth of the transport network in that country/city
3. Thirdly, the very successful HKBU Master of Project Management degree program was considered to be a likely candidate for translation into the China market. An initial development of a potential partnership with another Beijing University, eventually failed to lead to negotiation of a mutual agreement (after considerable time and effort). A subsequent partner was sought at Southern Yangzte University (SYTU) in Wuxi, and negotiation of that change of partner agreement took place in July 2005.

Negotiation and approval processes

Following preliminary discussions about the feasibility of developing a particular type of transnational program, formalisation by the development of joint agreements is essential. Both parties typically need to sight agreements a number of times prior to consideration of signing. Agreements need to be passed between partners in both Chinese and English versions. Faxed documents are usually unacceptable and many courier deliveries occur prior to joint signing usually at the highest university level (PVC's or Vice Presidents). Much patience is required during these stages, as minor detailed misunderstandings or corrections can cause long delays. Recognition of responsibilities between partners and between staff of these institutions is critically important, and trust and mutual goodwill are essential. We consider that the success of our activities so far (and as yet not one course has been taught in any of these proposed programs in mainland China after more than 3 years of work) is due to factors such as: having access to expert bilingual staff actively involved in the negotiations; supply of high quality administrative support; strong support and encouragement from senior management; and the acceptance and faith (as exemplified by the continued expenditure of scarce resources) that this activity is long term in nature. We also emphasise the importance of supporting our resident adjunct staff member in Beijing (one of the authors – AH), which saves an enormous amount of time and money that otherwise would have to be spent sending staff from Australia to do the initial investigations and negotiations.

Another significant factor in the potential success of transnational program offerings in China is the fact that since 2003, all externally offered degree programs must be individually approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE). This is again a lengthy and tedious process. Program approval documentation is comprehensive and detailed and must be completed and submitted by the partner university in China. Only two periods of submission are allowed (March and September), and many follow-on queries from MOE must be answered promptly and accurately. Final approval simply allows the program to go ahead, with usually one cohort permitted that will then be monitored closely for quality and appropriateness within a proscribed time period. This phase must then be followed by program and curriculum development, course content development, quality and assessment technique approval, timetable and staffing decisions, and finally, commencement of marketing and promotion.

In terms of our individual programs there has been variable progress and success. The BICEA program was approved by MOE in 2003, but the final agreement between the partners to begin the teaching, and receipt of sufficient enrolments to make it viable, has meant that the first cohort will commence the program in September 2005.

BJTU Master of Logistics and Transport took a long time and included many visits to their institution before finally submitting the documents to MOE in March 2005. The final approval is expected shortly and marketing will then commence immediately.

The loss of the original partner university for the transition of the Master of Project Management from Hong Kong into China has likewise delayed the commencement of this program, but the new SYTU partner is very keen to see the program started and papers are expected to be submitted to MOE by September 2005, for commencement in early 2006.

Difficulties encountered in progressing all of these programs have included the issues of appropriate promotion and marketing in China where there is often a marketing fee charged per student enrolled. The length of time needed to successfully negotiate an outcome is also seemingly excessive, with a need for constant and open discussion and negotiation (much by email but also involving face to face); language, interpretation and translation issues; and finally a judgement of the costs involved in all of these activities, compared to the potential, but for us as yet unrewarded, financial gains.

Marketing

The provision of transnational education is seen, appropriately, as a business as well as an educational opportunity by most universities in mainland China. Experience of the staff of the School of Natural and Built Environments (NBE), and our anecdotal research into the

performance of transnational programs of other Australian and other overseas universities operating in mainland China, suggests that recognition of marketing as a legitimate business activity, allocation of sufficient funds to it, and ensuring that the partner university either possesses or has access to experienced marketing services, are prerequisites for a continuing and growing stream of students into the programs.

In our experience, the Chinese partner university is primarily responsible for marketing the transnational programs, with the School of NBE having a monitoring and approval role to ensure the accuracy of the marketing material and assisting in some promotional evenings. Typically, for a Masters degree program costing RMB 60,000 (about \$10,000), our present and prospective partners allocate a little more than RMB10,000 (\$1,670) per student to marketing (since the teaching and the student fee is shared 50:50 with partner universities, marketing amounts to about one third of the share received by the partner universities). This is used primarily for:

- producing an informative and attractive brochure in both Chinese and English,
- purchasing 2-3 months' sustained advertising on one or more of the major websites that specialize in the promotion of education and training programs,
- providing a dual-level telephone answering service, with the first level being manned by junior staff who receive initial enquiries and collect preliminary information and the second level by more experienced staff who phone back the enquirer after they have analysed this information, and
- one or more information evenings.

Interpretation, translation and English language issues

Some of the School of NBE's transnational programs are likely to be delivered in both Chinese and English. This poses challenges for course material, delivery and assessment. However, with its staff having more than four years of experience with dual language programs in mainland China, the School is confident that it has developed an approach that successfully meets these challenges.

With its strong background in project management, the School of NBE intends to adopt a project management approach to the delivery of its transnational programs in Mainland China and treat each course in its programs as a sub-project. This will involve the preparation of a project management plan that covers, among other things, course material, delivery and assessment. For example, the plan for a course might require that in Week 1 (about 16 weeks before lectures commence) the Program Director appoints the lecturer and asks them to nominate a textbook for the course. The Chinese partner university then determines if the nominated book is available in mainland China and, if it is not and there is no other satisfactory book available in Chinese, the School will arrange for it to be translated into Chinese by a specialist company in Beijing. During Weeks 5-12, the Study Guide, the PowerPoint presentation and other teaching and learning materials will be prepared and translated into Chinese. The latter is not as straightforward as might initially appear, since there are no direct translations for some technical terms, and the Chinese word used in, say, Beijing, might not be the same as that used in Singapore, Hong Kong or Taiwan. During Weeks 3-4, language versions of the Study Guide, PowerPoint presentations and other materials will be printed by the Chinese partner university and made available to the students who can then read the material before lectures start.

Provision of proper interpreter support when the UniSA lecturer is not fluent in Chinese is perhaps the most important challenge. In these cases, the School's course plan requires that the interpreter be identified at least four weeks before commencement of lectures. Normally, the interpreter should be a faculty member of the Chinese partner university who teaches English for technical purposes and is accustomed to applying their skills to new subjects. At this time the interpreter will be provided with a copy of the course materials as well as a glossary of technical terms and will then be asked, specifically, to review the PowerPoint presentation and the glossary. The interpreter will resolve many issues either with local Chinese lecturers or by

email communication with the UniSA lecturer well before the start of lectures. Remaining issues should be discussed by the interpreter and the lecturer after the latter arrives in China and before the lectures are delivered.

A typical assessment will include an examination and assignments. For multiple-choice examinations, the use of two languages obviously will not pose problems if the UniSA lecturer speaks both languages. There are, however, challenges for essay questions and assignments when the UniSA lecturer does not read Chinese. In these cases, the School will arrange for the Chinese partner university to have the material translated by a person who is not only expert in both languages but is also familiar with the subject matter of the course. The UniSA lecturer will then be provided with two files, one containing the original Chinese language exam answers or assignments prepared by the student, and the other the English language translations by the Chinese expert. When the lecturer has difficulties with a particular translation they may show both the Chinese and English versions to a colleague who possesses skills in both languages and a sound knowledge of course content. Anecdotal experience by one of the authors (AH) indicates that, in a class of 50 students, this is necessary for only 1-2 papers.

Conclusions

Our Project Management Programs in Hong Kong have been excellently presented and received for many years. They have developed for us a strong profile and a remarkably active and positive cohort of alumni. As well as providing profit funds to reinvest in developing new markets and programs, these collaborative activities have also provided an excellent international outlet for academic, professional and sessional staff within our School, plus a steady stream of spin-off international onshore students who regularly come to Adelaide from Hong Kong for a range of other educational experiences.

With the emphasis on internationalisation expressed by UniSA, the weak local growth in demand for our programs and courses, the limited Commonwealth funding for local students, and the strong demand for western styles of education and course materials in the English language from mainland China, we envisage a long term growth of transnational activity there. Our aim is not to view this as a mechanism for short term profit, but rather as a very long term investment in developing the strongest relationships that we possibly can with what is obviously going to be our most important regional and global partner in years to come. Working in China is demanding and difficult, but it is also immensely exciting and we are delighted to be at the forefront of an educational revolution.

Postscript

The majority of this paper was written on aircraft flying between major cities in China (Beijing, Jinan, Shanghai and Hong Kong) in July 2005, as the authors continued their travels and negotiations with potential transnational partners.

Copyright © 2005 James, P., Ma, T., Hooke, A., & Larden, D. The authors assign to ODLAA and educational non-profit institutions a nonexclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant to ODLAA a nonexclusive license to publish this document in electronic or print form within ODLAA publications and/or the world wide web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.

References

Meredith J.R. & Mantel S.J. (2000). *Project management – a managerial approach*. 4th edn., John Wiley & Sons.

PMI (2000). *A guide to the project management body of knowledge*. Project Management Institute, Upper Darby.

Ma T (2003) A transnational project management program in Hong Kong: A collaborative case study. Paper presented at the 28th AUBEA Annual Conference at Deakin University on 9th to 11th July, Australia.