

Chapter 18

Academic Leadership and the Business Gateway to the Chinese and Portuguese Speaking World

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ABSTRACT

NOVA School of Business and Economics (NOVA SBE) identified the opportunity to complement the training of the best language universities in China to bring Chinese students with basic fluency in Portuguese to Universidade NOVA de Lisboa (UNL). They would be trained in Economics and Management at NOVA SBE and complement their Portuguese language studies at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (FCSH-UNL) obtaining at the end a joint degree from UNL. After a lobby from the university leadership, the Portuguese Government eventually recognized this degree focused on its unique characteristics, namely (1) a Portuguese university as a means to cooperate with Chinese institutions to achieve their strategic goals in Africa and LATAM, (2) multidisciplinary cooperation putting together social sciences and business and economics, and (3) a potential internationalization cooperation for the Portuguese and Chinese HEI's markets far beyond the simple exchange of students.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a case study about how the economic value of a teaching language can stress the role of Universities in the development of international relations through curriculum restructuring and offering of programs that fill a gap in the market. In particular we call the attention to the role of the academic leadership in identifying that opportunity and fighting for its implementation when facing the political regulation.

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As a story-telling document, this paper cannot – and should not - be seen as a traditional academic article. If that was the case, it would have been written in the context of the intersection of several different areas of knowledge, namely higher education studies (curriculum design), academic leadership, cross-cultural management, international business, and international relations. In that the case, this paper would have been written in a completely different setting, using an adequate research methodology, a proper literature review that would put the problem into its theoretical context and would provide a lot of possible insights for further research.

However this was not the intended goal of this piece. This article simply reflects a case study based on the experimental implementation of a pedagogical program led by a very pragmatic need of European and Chinese institutions. As such, the suggestions for further research are self-contained in the text, to be analyzed by the experts in these different fields.

STRATEGICALLY POSITIONING A BUSINESS SCHOOL

Around 2010, Nova School of Business and Economics (Nova SBE) was concerned in developing a meaningful international strategic positioning. In the very competitive landscape of Business Schools, Nova SBE has had the chance of claiming its South Atlantic Triangle Strategy, based on the fact that it was the top Business School in the only European country with simultaneous cultural links with both sides of the South Atlantic (the three vertices of an imaginary triangle): Latin America (with a strong emphasis in Portuguese-speaking Brazil) and Sub-Saharan Africa (with a strong focus in Angola and Mozambique, the two leading Portuguese speaking countries in the continent). These cultural links are reflected in strong business educational connections with the strongest institutions in those countries.

When compared with the main European players this strategic positioning based on the Portuguese language would provide a very distinctive feature, non-replicable by Schools in any other European country. However, something was missing in the competitive higher education landscape. At that point in time most of the main global players were already well established in the Asian continent, with a particular focus in India and, in particular, in China.

The Chinese market has been seen as the most promising market for recruiting higher education students from the perspective of international universities, especially for the USA, UK and Australia who would carry a very strong brand image associated to the Anglophone educational system. The reason was not only for the excellent level of the top trained Chinese students, but also because of (1) the significant Chinese market volume; (2) the limited capacity of absorption by local top Universities; (3) the growth levels of the Chinese economy in the last decades, and (4) the obvious need of increasing levels of qualified people in the near future in order to sustain such economic growth.

The fact is that most of the main Chinese recruitment hubs were filled of very tough competition among most foreign Universities, including all main European countries such as France, Italy, Spain, Sweden and others. The perception that Nova SBE had at that time was that it was arriving too late to find its own niche in that market. The challenge posed to Nova SBE was to find a creative and different way to enter that market, in a way that could be hardly replicated by any other foreign University.

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