Chapter 3
Transnational Learning and Collaboration in Delivering MBA Programs in Emerging Markets:
The Challenge of National Culture

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ABSTRACT

This case focuses on the challenges of delivering Western-style MBA programs in emerging markets, looking at the experience of the Researcher in teaching and assessing courses within management programs (especially in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management) and in thesis and dissertation research and writing. The case considers: cultural differences, learning style differences, language differences, economic backgrounds of students, classroom behavior and etiquette, involvement in the learning process, teaching methods, the teacher and the students, group work, examining and evaluating, assignments, projects and reports, theses and major pieces of research-based work, life in the classroom, inter-student behavior, and life out of the classroom. The case focuses on MBA course delivery in China, the Arab World, Africa, Iran, Malaysia and Indonesia, Vietnam, Eastern Europe, former Russian states such as Kazakhstan, and South America, such as Peru and Suriname. Examples of specific MBA teaching and assessment are provided to give in-depth insights into the issues involved.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The organization under reference in this case is one of the leading Schools of Management in the Netherlands. The school has more than 20 transnational learning collaborations across the developing world. Some of these collaborations have been in operation for over ten years and have produced as many as 1,000 MBA graduates per single academic partnership. Overall, nearly 1,000 graduates emerge from all the collaborations annually.

SETTING THE STAGE

MBA programs from "the West" are now increasingly being delivered in emerging markets, such as in Asia, Africa and Middle East. An MBA from a reputable and accredited international business school or university enables students in these countries to join international companies, become expatriates, earn significantly more money, and gain elite status in society. For the MBA providers, this expansion possibility internationally – together with online and distance courses – can facilitate these business schools and universities to increase revenues and remain competitive. This can be both outbound – the providers go to them – and inbound – they come to the providers. Here, the focus is on the former scenario – transnational learning provided by the School of Management considered here through collaboration with partners (mostly other universities or business schools) in China and the countries of Africa, The Middle East, South-East Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, etc.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The following case study has been based on the experience of the Researcher in four and a half years of teaching around the world, following four years of delivering "Western" style MBAs whilst based in one of the countries of the Middle East.

MBA program delivery outbound to emerging markets can present completely new challenges, especially for faculty. The students behave in completely unexpected ways, and demand unheard of – and sometimes quite unacceptable – new arrangements. These can include issues of academic integrity and other matters relating to academic standards. The students ask for special treatment with more time to finish assignments and examinations, want to attend less than the full hours of study, expect compromising insights into the assessment items, resist individual accountability,

refuse to accept rules about plagiarism, and admire those who can hoodwink or otherwise undermine authority. These issues can be seen as reflecting cultural norms: high power distance, uncertainty avoidance, ascribed leadership, collectivism, synchronism and diffuseness, particularistic behaviors and other national cultural concepts identified in by theorists in the literature.

This case study has aimed to identify the cultural barriers to successful MBA delivery in emerging market contexts and to recommend strategies for maintaining product quality and integrity, through evidence-based research to help decision-making for hands-on faculty members and the initiators of international partnerships, who should take these operational, delivery issues into account when preparing their strategies. This can be seen as a perspective for technology-related issues, which must take the socio-cultural-economic aspects of transnational learning initiatives into account.

In summary, the rationale for this case study stems from the fact that more and more MBA courses are being launched in emerging markets, despite the overall worldwide recession; that this represents an ongoing challenge for teachers of these courses, sometimes ill-prepared for these environments, given the lack of orientation provided to them; and the existence of considerable cross-cultural issues, which are rarely explored in detail. Teachers of executive courses, language teachers, aid workers and all visiting expatriate teachers and consultants focused on emerging market participants will also probably face these and similar issues. How can MBA faculty in particular gain insights to overcome cross-cultural barriers, keep up standards of the course and product, and manage multicultural training groups in the best way they can? Technology can be both an enabler and a barrier here. The standardization of course materials, the ability to electronically send materials in advance, the use of technology in the classroom when delivering the program – all these have benefits and drawbacks. These issues are discussed in detail in the following case.

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