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When Distance Learning Meets with Foreign Academic Cultures

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Project Reference Number:	178
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Description:	<p>Aims of project</p> <p>The specific objectives are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To identify the differences between the academic culture in China and in the UK based on the existing literatures; and to identify various established contemporary Distance Learning delivery approaches; ○ To identify and examine the commonalities and gaps between the perceptions and preferences of the “deliverers” and the “receivers” in Distance Learning with regard to delivery methods and approaches; ○ To analyse the implications of these gaps and to identify solutions for filling the gaps; ○ To provide recommendations for better design and practice of Distance Learning initiatives in a cross-cultural context in international collaborative programmes for the ultimate purpose of improving students’ learning experience and enhancing their learning outcomes; ○ To assist in designing an appropriate and effective delivery approach responsive to the needs of students for this joint Master of Laws initiative. <p>Background/context to project</p> <p>Under the current climate of internationalisation of higher education in the UK, Plymouth University has indicated in its Teaching and Learning Strategy (2009), that it will “encourage international collaboration through... joint academic developments with global partners” and is committed to ‘develop an internationalised approach to learning and teaching’ (p.8). A number of international collaborations have been established over the past few years, e.g., the partnership with the China Agricultural University. Currently, new initiatives are under negotiation, one of which is the establishment of a joint Master of Laws (LLM) Programme in Marine and Maritime Law with Shanghai Maritime University (SMU) in China. This initiative was developed during the Vice-Chancellor’s visit to Shanghai last year; at the time of</p>

writing, a detailed agreement for the programme is under discussion.

With the increasing development of distance learning over the past twenty years (Hawkridge & Wheeler, 2009; Richardson, 2009), many pedagogic studies have been carried out that compare distance learning to face-to-face learning. Although findings have sometimes differed, (e.g. some suggest that students receiving online tuition have reported poorer experiences than those receiving face-to-face tuition (see e.g., Price et al, 2007; Kitto & Higgins, 2003; Hara & Kling, 2000; Hartley, 2002), whilst others claim that there is no difference between the two (see e.g., Richardson, 2009)), it is notable that these studies are all conducted within the context of a single 'academic culture' (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p.76) and therefore, no reference or consideration is given to the differences in academic culture between 'deliverers' of the courses and 'receivers' in cases where they are continents apart.

As defined by Cortazzi and Jin (1996), 'academic culture' is 'the systems of beliefs, expectations and cultural practices about how to perform academically' (p.76). As such, the effects of culture on students' ability to communicate and participate effectively within academic discourses and communities should be fully recognised and addressed. It is reasonable to envisage that an inquiry about this issue would be especially significant in terms of distance learning because the salient features of different academic cultures may be altered (either magnified or minimised) by the distance as well as by the use of IT if used as part of it. On the other hand, it is also possible to imagine that the distance may well be prolonged or shortened by the differences in culture. There have been some studies pertaining to academic cultures and particularly the Chinese academic culture (e.g., Rastall 2006; Jin & Cortazzi 2006; Volet & Ang 1998; Higgins & Li 2009; Gu & Schweisfurth 2006; Chan 1997; Cheng 2002; Jones 1999; Lee 1996), although none of these studies were carried out in connection with or in the context of distance learning.

This project therefore aims to develop a case study to investigate the implications of the existence of differences in academic culture for distance learning and to provide insight into approaches that might enhance the effectiveness of distance learning in a cross-cultural environment. The project findings will be used to inform recommendations to international collaboration programmes, including the Plymouth University Master of Laws initiative for better design of learning and teaching approaches.

Methods used

Stage 1 (at University of Plymouth)

- Desk based research including review of literature and documents pertaining to distance learning and academic cultures.
- Focus group with Plymouth staff who were involved in designing or delivering the joint LLM programme to discuss various delivery approaches and identify the most plausible ones. (Sampled purposefully)

Stage 2 (at Shanghai Maritime University)

- Focus group interview conducted on-site with Shanghai students, the schedule for which was based on a preliminary analysis of the Plymouth staff focus group data. Observations of the practice, available equipment and constraints for distance learning in SMU was also carried out at this stage.

Stage 3 (at University of Plymouth)

- Data obtained from Stage 2 analysed and initial findings to be provided to those involved in Stage 1 for further comments and consideration.

Results

Not yet finalised, although 'first cut' analysis has been done. (Extension granted until Easter 2012) See below for progress.

Progress Report

A Research Assistant was appointed to assist in the Project.

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken and a considerable number of sources were gleaned.

An initial focus group interview with Plymouth University staff (the response rate was 75% from a purposefully sampled population) was conducted in order to ascertain staff views of what a distance learning package should consist of.

Data from the staff focus group was used to formulate questions for students. Contact was subsequently made with Shanghai Maritime University and data from Shanghai students was collected via a focus group interview. Students were sampled from Shanghai Maritime Law degree students who have just graduated from their Undergraduate degree. The response rate was 80%.

	<p>The initial data analysis has been completed and an article is currently being written.</p> <p>Impact on students (and staff if relevant) None yet because we are not at an implementation stage.</p> <p>Outcomes</p> <p>A poster for the VC's Teaching and Learning Conference was presented in July 2011. For the future, it is intended that first cut data will be used to develop our analyses further, to develop conference papers and one or more journal articles, as well as recommendations for international collaboration programmes, including the Plymouth University Master of Laws initiative for improved design of learning and teaching approaches.</p> <p>Problems encountered so far</p> <p>Delays in accessing Shanghai students meant that we had to request an extension to the finish date for this project and we have subsequently been given an extension until Easter 2012.</p>
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