DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS IN THE WORLD

Reaching Out to the World: Developing and Delivering Higher Education Programs Through Distance Education to Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This article is to encourage and to provide successful experiences to United States (U.S.) institutions that may shy away from developing distance education programs that are to be delivered to foreign countries. Utah State University (USU) has been successfully delivering an interdisciplinary bachelors degree to Asian countries for four years. The article discusses the methodologies of how to develop and operate an international program from the U.S. to Asian countries. It provides U.S. institutions with the knowledge of Asian education systems, and political and cultural background. The current article was inspired by Marjorie Peace Lenn’s article, “The Right Way to Export Higher Education,” published in The Chronicle of Higher Education (March 1, 2002). The author indicated that “more countries realize that the key to economic growth is greater openness to foreign-based colleges” (Lenn, 2002). After China joined WTO December 11, 2001, the Chinese government encouraged the nation to learn English. Hong Kong and Thailand are also booming, with private business groups offering foreign certificates and degrees. The Singapore government plans to educate every citizen with a college degree. The market demand for Western education is there. How prepared are our U.S. higher education institutions to reach out through distance education?

Keywords: distance education; distance learning

CONCERNS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION TO BE DELIVERED IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

The quality of a course delivered through distance education is always the first concern raised by educators. Is the quality and the content of courses delivered via online or satellite equal to the quality of courses delivered via face-to-face instruction? Is there enough student-instructor contact or sufficient direct contact from the instructor to the students? How valid are test results, since tests are proctored in a foreign country? Also, issues regarding accreditation, course quality, access to academic facilities and faculty credentials are raised by administrators and colleagues. Admission criteria and satellite costs are big concerns of the administrators, as well. Therefore, a distance education educator or developer not only has the responsibilities of building and operating a distance education program in a foreign country, but also should
have the ability to educate colleagues, administrators or corresponding authorities on why it is important to develop a distance education program in a foreign country.

ADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education allows an instructor to use information from the Internet, CDs, videotapes, prints, and so forth, and provide the information to students through distance education technologies. With online discussion or chat rooms, the instructor and students exchange roles, the knowledge of the course is shared, and learning sometimes becomes mutual. The state-of-the-art technology allows the instructor and students to connect or to have contact with each other outside the physical classroom environment and beyond time limits (Kettner-Polley, 2003; DeVries & Tella, 1998). An online course may not physically provide students library accesses, and yet, the Internet provides students with unlimited and free information. Technologies like telecommunication, video conferencing, video streaming or game rooms make it possible for instructors and students to exchange ideas and knowledge spontaneously, audibly and visually and without time delay. Reaching out to the world allows U.S. institutions to do business through distance. In his article “Why didn’t the walls come tumbling down? An outsider’s view of distance education,” Richard Seltzer indicated that “education is a business, not a charity. It depends on tuition fees and salaries and contracts” (2001). The USU experiences in running an international program in Asian countries are good examples of doing business through distance.

HOW TO START AN INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Market Demand and Connections.

Finding out what the foreign institutions need is the first thing to do. When we started the USU international distance education programs, we met with administrative personnel from the foreign institutions, and then, after establishing this connection, the administrators from the foreign institutions introduced the USU representatives to the administrators of the local Ministry of Education. It took both parties numerous face-to-face discussions, e-mails and phone calls to decide what programs the market demanded and what programs could be offered through distance education. One effective way to connect with people at foreign institutions is to attend international distance education fairs or use an educational program broker; for example, Global Knowledge Exchange (GKE). Publicizing program information in newspapers or online can also help an institution make more connections.

Understanding the Foreign Education Systems and Cultures

Countries Under the British Education System.

Understanding the education systems of different countries is helpful in developing connections, getting government approvals, setting up admission criteria and collecting tuition or purchasing textbooks. Almost all Asian countries use or somehow are influenced by the British education system. Students will go to school from age five or six to
16 or 17. There are 11 years of elementary, middle and high school education. After high school, if students wish to obtain a higher-level education, they need to take the General Certificate of Secondary Education or a similar test for high school completion. After two more years of studying two or three specific subjects, the student then will take the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education Test. This is usually called the A-Level Test.

Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore public and private universities are mainly using the A-Level Test results as the criteria to admit students if the students don’t have high school diplomas. If a U.S. institution operates a higher-education degree program in these countries, the suggested admission criteria is that a student should pass five or more major subjects on an A-Level Test before being admitted into the program. Unlike the U.S. college tuition systems, textbook fees are included in the tuition in those countries, and how much tuition should be collected is controlled by the government.

Socialist Education System.

China is a socialist country, and the education system is a little different than the countries mentioned above, since the Chinese government has much more control over such educational matters as curriculum, textbooks and tuition. The socialist education system is a free education system, and all colleges and universities are public. Over the last two decades, China has increasingly moved toward a semi-capitalist system and is no longer a pure socialist country. Consequently, education is not free anymore. China opened its door widely to Western education in the 1990s. Currently, private academic institutions are everywhere.

Students start school at the age of six and finish high school by the age of 18 in China. There are 12 years of elementary, middle and high school education. If students pass their high school completion tests, they will be given a high school diploma. If they wish to continue in higher education, they will take the higher education entrance test, which is held in July. Based on the admission requirements of the USU International Student and Scholar Office and the Chinese local education system, the USU international program admits students in China by requesting that the applicants provide their high school diplomas and TOEFL or GRE test scores.

Collecting tuition in China at the rates comparable to those in the U.S. is impossible. The Chinese government controls the tuition rate, which is usually determined by local standards of living and government regulations. Tuition and curriculums are fixed, and students take classes all day long, much like the U.S. high school system. Our international program has influenced the Chinese higher education institutions by collecting tuition according to the number of credits a student is taking.

Creating an Agreement

After deciding what program to deliver, both the U.S. institution and the host institution or foreign institution should compile an agreement or a contract. The agreement should include: the mission of the cooperation; responsibilities of each institution; curriculum; how many numbers of credits offered over a certain period of time; tuition; fees; admission and graduation criteria; student responsibilities; regulations of each institution; and so forth. The delivery model should be one of the important elements of the agreement. The agreement also needs to indicate that the host institution is responsible for exchanging the collected tuition from the
local currency to U.S. dollars and then sending the U.S. dollars to the U.S. institution. The finalized agreement of the cooperation should be presented to the administrators of both the U.S. institution and the host institution before it is signed. The administrators — for example, department heads, college deans and the provost’s office — should examine every item of the agreement and ensure that the items will be carried out as indicated, and then the agreement should be signed by the president and the provost of each institution.

Getting Government and Administrative Approval

Delivering a foreign degree program in Asian countries requires approvals from the local and central Ministry of Education of the country. The U.S. institutions also need approvals from their corresponding authorities in order to offer a higher education degree in a foreign country. In most Asian countries, an application of cooperation with a foreign institution (the host institution) for higher education degree programs and an agreement between the two parties needs to be submitted to the local Ministry of Education by the host institution. With the approval from the local Ministry of Education, the application and the agreement should be submitted to the Central Ministry of Education by the host institution. The U.S. institution needs to provide the host institution with the document of approval of the degree program from the corresponding accreditation, detailed curriculum and a sample of the diploma. In Singapore, we also had to provide a syllabus for each course of the four-year curriculum.

Operating an International Program

Infrastructure and Facilities

Operating an international program in a foreign country is different from operating a program at a home campus or on a distance education site in the U.S. In a foreign country, our degrees are offered through our host institutions, though the degrees are U.S. degrees and the students are the students of our U.S. institutions. Since our international sites are actually operated by our partner institutions, a series of questions would be raised by our colleagues; for example, is the infrastructure there strong enough to support our programs?, Should we dedicate the admission and registration responsibilities to the local institutions?, and so forth. It is crucial to have a local operational organization set up and to have the instructional facilities tested and ready before classes actually start. The organization should include a director, an academic staff and a secretarial staff. The organization may be larger, depending on the size of the student body. Necessary office space and phone lines should be provided by the host institution. Both partners should make sure that the distance education technologies and the multimedia classrooms function successfully for receiving and delivery, and should make sure that the delivery model is realistic, workable and suitable for the local students.

USU Delivery Model

Asian students would not want to sit in front of a computer-projected big screen to watch the American instructors giving lectures. People in Asian countries believe in traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. Therefore, a suitable and workable delivery model should be developed. In order to satisfy the local educational and cultural beliefs, the USU International Program de-
veloped a face-to-face distance education instructional model: a lead instructor located on the USU main campus instructs the class through distance education techniques, such as video conferencing, telecommunication, Internet or online courses. At our international sites, the lead instructor’s class is then facilitated by the local instructors in a face-to-face classroom environment. Weekly reports from the local instructors to the lead instructors are required and direct contacts from the lead instructor to the students take place by using video conferencing, e-mail and feedback on assignments, quizzes and tests.

**Recommended Effective Delivery Model**

Barry Willis, in his article, “Distance Education at a Glance,” suggested the more effective and practical ways of delivering courses through distance education. He indicated that “… interactive audio or video conferencing can provide real-time face-to-face (or voice-to-voice) interaction. This is also an excellent and cost-effective way to incorporate guest speakers and content experts.” The article also suggested hiring an on-site facilitator to facilitate the instructor’s course (Willis, 2003). The USU face-to-face distance education instructional delivery model not only uses the local instructor’s eyes and ears but also expertise to instruct the class and make the class alive.

**Admission and Registration**

A-Level Test results should be required in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore if a student doesn’t have a high school diploma. Singapore students don’t need to submit TOEFL scores, since the national language of the country is English. High school diplomas and TOEFL or GRE scores should be required for admission in China. A newly admitted student should be assigned an off-campus international student identification number. In this way, on-campus fees, on-campus international student fees and insurance fees will be waived. Special and identifiable registration codes for courses offered in foreign countries should also be created. Although the students of international sites are physically in a foreign country, student services should still be provided from their U.S. institutions.

**Evaluation of the Program**

In Asian countries, the accreditation councils evaluate foreign degree programs once or twice during each academic year. The evaluation categories and questions vary from country to country. The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation evaluation categories include: (1) curriculum, (2) changes of curriculum during each academic year, (3) fees, payment (tuition) arrangement and refund arrangement, (4) enrollment statistics, (5) course duration, (6) course content and quality, (7) quality of faculty, and (8) the quality of the current Hong Kong teaching staff. The Chinese Central Ministry of Education Degree Evaluation Committee evaluation categories include: (1) instructional equipment, (2) quality of U.S. institution faculty, (3) quality of local faculty (local instructors), (4) management of the program, (5) organization of the institution, (6) results of the delivery of the program, and (7) specific characteristics of the program. Useful suggestions are adopted in order to improve our program.

**CONCLUSION**

Reaching out to the world through distance education is the current trend of education. The state-of-the-art technology
of distance education enables us to do so. The technology makes it possible for students from different countries to enroll in an American institution. The students do not have to come to America to fulfill their dreams for an American education. At the same time, we, the U.S. institutions, benefit by the increased enrollment and the tuition from the countries to which we offer our degrees. The USU International Program has wonderful experience in delivering distance education to Asian countries and benefits greatly from reaching out to the world. We hope our experience and success will provide useful methodologies and will encourage future developers and people who are interested in developing international programs.

REFERENCES


