

The establishment of a joint research program between two universities
from Australia and China

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Abstract

This paper describes the establishment of a joint research program with researchers in universities in Australia (an Education Faculty, at University of Wollongong) and China (Faculty of English Language and Literature, at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies). It examines some of the issues involved in establishing collaborative research.

Some socio-cultural matters that became salient included aspects of inter-cultural communication involving bilingual skills, historically embedded attitudes to scholarly work, and a number of systemic elements in the partners' educational contexts. These latter include: varying perceptions of process and outcome, of the role of the teacher, and of preferred learning activities and classroom interaction types.

The joint research projects were generated from the research agendas of both universities, which are necessarily affected by wider cultural issues, such as: the value placed on education by parents in China, the single child policy, the emergence of private schools, and China's Open Door policy for attracting investment, with increasing emphasis on learning English. The collaborators in this program have identified a number of key components of the relationship that are proving to be essential elements in pulling faculty members together and enabling them to face the challenges of working productively.

Introduction

China is a major country in the world. In the last decade, Australia has tried to establish good relationships with China. A good relationship is a corner stone to for the development of joint educational and business projects. These projects will have mutual benefits for Chinese as well as Australians.

Due to the social and cultural background, value system, and languages, each country has its own style and view point upon education. In the first part of the paper, we will give a general overview about education in Australia and China. The second part of the paper will

provide the rationale for establishing the joint research program between two universities from Australia and China. The third part of the paper will identify the essential components of the relationship.

Overview - Education in Australia

Australia is a young country when it is compared to China. Education in Australia is influenced by its historical, social, and cultural background.

University education was originally not for everyone, but just for a small elite group in Australian society. Britain had a great

influence upon Australia's history. Education was a way to put people into classes; University graduates were the elites in the society and there was no need for everyone to be elite. It was argued that there is no need to have many university graduates because Australia was a country which sold natural resources such as coal, and steel. Farming was also a major industry in Australia. It needed unskilled workers rather than university graduates.

In the nineteenth century, Australia was a wealthy country with highly skilled labour forces. This is because the world was in a manufacturing age and Australia had abundant natural resources. According to Withers (1992, p.13), "

In the nineteenth century Australia had it all. The common view is that it was Australia's natural resource wealth, developed by foreign investment capital, that underpinned Australia's position at the head of the world's per capita GDP league ladder in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Australia had one of the world's most skilled labour forces".

However, in the twentieth century, "Australia's domestic education and training fell well behind world best practice, except perhaps for the small elite in the university system" (Withers, 1992, p.13)

In the 60's and 70's, education was not the only way to ensure that people would have a good living. Many people left school after Year 10 or Year 12 because there were jobs for them or they wanted to learn a trade skill. This also could reflect the fact that parents did not value their children's education very much. Usually the salary for a tradesman was as good as or even better than a university graduate. In the early 90's, the economic recession increased the unemployment rate. Many people could not get jobs., some of them returning to schools and universities to upgrade their education and/or skills.

In the last decade, Australia has been changing at a very fast pace.

These changes include parenting children, new immigrants, global world changes, and Australian government's attitude towards education. All these changes made a great impact upon present day Australian education.

Parenting is an important way for children to learn culture, values, knowledge, and skills from their parents. In the 90s, children tend to have less time with their parents. This is because more mothers are at work and many children are from single parent families. According to Loane(1996, p.34), "At present, 52 per cent of mothers with children under four are working, a figure that has doubled in the past decade." . May be because of the de facto relationship situation in Australia, there are many single parents who usually need to work to support the family. In addition to the pressure at work, he/she has to make time with their children. As a result, those children may have communication problems with their parents: They do may believe their parents can understand them, may feel lonely or neglected, and perhaps do not have their parental support or guidance when they have problems. As a result, schools may have more problem learners than before.

New immigrants tend to value education more in Australia. In the last ten years, Australia allowed more new immigrants to come to Australia and many of them believed education would be a way to change their lives, to integrate into Australian society, and to get a better job. The new immigrants put a heavy emphasis upon the value of education.

Another major change in the last ten years is that the developed

countries have been moving toward the information industry. They are not depending on manufacturing products, but providing services and information. In order to catch up with other developed countries, Australia has to develop a well educated work force. The Australian government would like to ensure that it has a well educated work force to compete with other countries. The government tried to emphasise that they value education in their reports and reviews (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993). There are more universities than before and The number of university students has been increased.

To ensure the people in the major working force receive a reasonable level of training in their field, the government introduced the Training Guarantee Act in 1990 (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993). The act "requires employers with annual payrolls of at least \$200,000 (indexed to \$222000 in 1992-1993) to spend at least 1.5 percent of payroll on eligible training" (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993, p.102).

There are many areas in Australian education which could be, should be, and will be improved. Australians generally realise that Australia

needs a good education and a well trained work force.

Overview - Education in China

China was among the first in the world to set up a formal school education, the embryonic form of which dates back as early as the primitive commune period around 2700 BC. Poverty and backwardness, however, became a severe obstacles to education for over a century in modern Chinese history. Since 1949, China has come a long way in attaining its goal in education, but it is still some way off from many of the developed countries. Of the total 220 million students in China, for example, 1/3 cannot go above the primary school, another 1/3 not above the junior middle school and less than 30% up to the senior middle school. The average schooling nationwide is less than five years.

In order to meet the needs of the country's modernization which has been under way since 1978, an educational reform is inevitable. The general goal of China's educational development by the end of the century is to set up a basic framework for an education system with Chinese characteristics. In order to achieve this goal, the state has formulated a strategy for educational development. Its main points include: improving the quality of education, stressing efficiency in school management, adjusting the educational structure, adhering to a coordinated and balanced programme of development, increasing input in education, optimizing the teaching staff, practicing regional planning, and strengthening communal participation, etc. Of all the above mentioned points, improving the quality of education is the key issue. Educational institutions of the whole country are making efforts in its realization. This is one of the most important reasons why these institutions in China are trying to establish links with their counterparts in other countries.

In China, the Confucian doctrine of pursuing a mental rather than physical profession has been dominant for centuries. To many Chinese parents, children's education is more important than anything else. In the early 80's, when China started to experiment with her brand of market economy, the Chinese people were bewildered by the emergence of many new rich who had little formal education but took advantage of the new economic policy. Many of them began to doubt the value of

education. But with the ever deepening social and economic development, especially in the 90's, Chinese society has witnessed a renewal of enthusiasm in education. With the implementation of "one child" policy, with people's living standard raised to a new level, their expectation of their children's education has mounted to a new height. China is therefore facing a new interest in investing in education, both from local government, business sectors and the parents.

In the developed coastal areas, investment in education has increased substantially. According to statistics from the Guangdong Bureau of Higher Education, the 1995 budget for Guangdong provincial tertiary education is 511.77 million yuan, about 7 times the 78.8 million in 1986. When the Guangdong Education Fund was set up in 1993, it raised about 5 million yuan from social organizations and individuals. Now it has 50 million, the largest fund in Guangdong. As the current national education policy on higher education is to consolidate the existing institutions rather than setting up new ones, the number of universities and polytechnic schools in 1995 is not much different from that in 1986 in Guangdong: 103 institutions of higher learning in 1995 as against 103 in 1986, 535 polytechnic schools in 1995 vs. 501 in 1986. However, the number of students increased dramatically. In 1986 the number of on campus college students was 164,407, in 1995 the figure increased to 238,545. In 1986 there were 201,902 on campus polytechnic school students, and in 1995 the figure increased to 450,685.

The business sector also sees the establishment of elite schools as a profitable area of investment. In the 90's, more than 10 schools of this kind was established in Guangzhou area alone. The tuition fees vary from 2,000 to 5,000 yuan a year with an additional deposit which amounts from 80,000 to 200,000. An ordinary family has to work 5 to 10 years to save such an amount of money, yet the schools can always find more than enough good students to fill their classrooms, and, among them, about half are from ordinary families.

Even in some poverty stricken rural areas, local education benefits from the Project Hope, a nationwide project initiated by China Youth Development Foundation in 1989. With the donation from social institutions, mass organizations, foundations and individuals at home and abroad, the project is able to provide financial assistance to many school dropouts who had to work to support their families. It also provides funding to improve the teaching facilities of many local schools in these areas. It is now a well understood truth by the local people that the hope of these areas rests on the youngsters with knowledge for creative labor, and that economic development depends on education.

China has experienced a U turn in her effort to provide education to the young people during the past 20 years. There is now a healthy tendency in China that the entire society has rediscovered the importance of education in the drive for modernization.

The rationale of establishing the joint research project

We believe a joint research program needs to benefit both involved parties. Each party has its own good reasons for doing the joint

research project. We will explain how the joint research project benefits both parties.

Bill Winser and Wing Cheung in the Faculty of Education at University of Wollongong developed an interest in developing computer-assisted

learning software packages to help people whose first language is not English to learn it. They received a small Australian Research Council grant to support their research in the initial stage. Their research projects matched the Faculty of Education's focus. The Faculty of Education aims to push the frontier in two areas: information technology and language. In recent years, the faculty put in resources to develop its strength in those two areas, such by establishing the interactive multimedia research lab for carrying out research projects in the information technology area, and the language education centre for language areas. The outcome of the research project will provide a new learning environment for new immigrants and overseas students to improve their English. The computer-assisted learning environment will save many face to face teaching hours. As a result, this will save money for the Australian government and universities.

Bill Winser and Wing Cheung also made/took the initiative to reach out to universities in China to find a research partner interested in doing joint research in computer-assisted English learning. This also matches with the University of Wollongong's objective. One of the University of Wollongong's objectives is to internationalise the university (University of Wollongong, 1996). The university plans to expand the research link with other universities in various countries.

The English Department at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies is strong in linguistics and applied linguistics. Its MA program in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics started in 1978, the earliest in China after 1949. It started doctoral programs in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics in 1987, and in 1988 the program was granted the only key doctoral program in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics by the Academic Commission of the State Council. The strength of the department is in the areas of English language testing, theoretical linguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, and computational linguistics. Unlike many similar programs in other Chinese universities, both the magisterial and doctoral programs emphasize the quantitative analysis of language uses. The department has won 5 top Chinese research grants for social sciences, among them 2 for the 7th five-year-plan projects, 2 for the 8th five-year-plan projects, and 1 for the 9th five-year-plan project.

The 9th five-year-plan project currently going on aims at developing an intelligent, diagnostic electronic courseware for the Chinese EFL learners. According to the latest statistics (Chen, 1996), there are now 49,816,600 middle school students in China. Among them, 49,300,000

learn English as the foreign language. With such a huge student population, it is difficult to provide enough qualified English teachers. Among the 423,909 total number of middle school English teachers, only 33% of the junior middle school teachers and 36.8% of the senior middle school teachers have completed normal or short-cycle undergraduate courses. This means that about 2/3 of the middle school English teachers are not qualified. At the current turn out rate of English majors from Chinese institutions of higher learning, 10,000 a year (Dong, 1996), it would take about 270 years to train or replace all the unqualified teachers. Li (1996) argued that advanced information technology may be an effective means to address the problem plaguing China. Given that the most advanced computer programs cannot replace the human teachers, they can make use of some expert knowledge, and in some aspects, provide teaching better than many unqualified teachers. This conviction is the motivation of the project.

In the research, the research team are also looking for research partners not only at home, but also from abroad. Special interests are put in the kind of partnership which is mutually complementary. An

important part of the project is to develop some second language acquisition theory which will be the theoretical foundation of the courseware. A sound approach is to draw references from the research on first language acquisition where English is the first language. It is therefore necessary to have access to English learning in an English speaking country. Another consideration for outside links is to benefit from people who have the expertise of the latest multimedia technology. Although the team have experience in computational linguistics which will help develop the core of the courseware, they need to take advantage of the latest multimedia technology to provide more authentic learning activities. When the colleagues at Wollongong University proposed the joint research, and their strength is known, the English Department believes that this is the kind of partnership it is looking for. The partnership also gains full support from the university leadership, and the President promised to provide accommodation for frequent visits from the Australian side and special support for joint publication. To date there has been one jointly authored paper in a Chinese journal (in Chinese), and two joint conference presentations are being made during 1996, in Singapore and Hong Kong. A major Australian Research Council study on language development and curricula in Australia is being broadened to include a contribution of text data from the Chinese researchers.

We believe the joint research project allows us to share our knowledge, skill, and expertise, in reaching a common goal. Though the motive in doing the joint project may be different, the outcome will still benefit both parties.

Identifying the essential components of the relationship

We believe mutual interest, attitude and communications are the essential components of the joint research relationship. We will discuss each of these issues in the following sections.

Genuine Partnership

When China embarked on her policy of opening up to the outside world in the late 70s, many Chinese universities actively sought links with universities abroad. For quite a long time, the Chinese side regarded such links as facilities for teacher training. The Chinese teachers going abroad mainly acted as students or research assistants. To be honest, the Chinese side benefited a lot from such links. However, as Chinese people become more and more confident with China's rapid development in economy and science and technology, many Chinese scholars are not content with being treated as assistants. They are looking for genuine cooperation which is mutually beneficial as far as the project itself is concerned. We see real benefit for both sides in the joint research project, both in terms of academic value and its commercial potential.

Mutual Interest

We believe mutual interest is a very important issue to establish the relationship. Some universities establish joint research agreements with other overseas universities, but there may be no joint research going on after the agreement. The agreement is wasted. Mutual interest is the key to pull people together to really establish the joint relationship, not the agreement.

We believe that the more staff members from both sides are involved, the broader mutual interests can be found and sustained. There are 6 staff members of the English Department currently involved in 3 joint papers and 2 longer term joint projects.

Attitude

Attitude includes open mindedness, honesty, mutual respect, and a give and take attitude. Both parties need to be open minded. This means they are willing to listen to each other. Since both parties have different backgrounds, they may have new ideas for the other party. Each party should be willing to consider various new ideas to solve a problem or to achieve a goal.

Both parties have to be honest to each other. If a party suggest a

research topic, but the other party does not like it, the second party should share the point of view clearly to the first. Mutual respect is also a very important issue. Both parties have to respect each other. Mutual respect allows both parties to express themselves freely in their ideas and contributions because they know the other party will respect them.

Both parties should have a give and take attitude. Since the joint project will involve human and other resources, there will be times when a party has to share its resource with the other party in order to continue the research. However, there should be a balance between give and take; It is hard to measure such a factor in a relationship, and the desirability of such a measure is questionable, so as long as both parties are happy with their situation, the relationship will continue on.

Communication

Communication is very important for both parties in maintaining a relationship. We have used various ways and means to communicate, including regular meetings, and email communication. Face to face meetings Usually take place every six months. Usually these regular meetings have a long agenda and include future planning. E-mail usually is used to discuss research issues and administrative matters.

By September, 1996, the Chinese side had paid 1 visit to their Australian partners, and the Australian side had paid several visits to their Chinese partners in 95 and 96. The Australian side anticipates another visit to the Chinese side at the end of December, and the Chinese side is sending a visiting scholar to work for 8 months in Australia from next March. It is clear that such a relationship could not have been established without regular face to face contact; the cultural significance of this cannot be over emphasised.

Conclusion

The two parties to this collaborative arrangement believe that the relationship has matured to the point where the research projects selected will continue into the foreseeable future. There is agreement on the linguistic models being used in the projects, the possibilities in developing a joint corpus of texts and in producing teaching programs are very important, and there are complementary strengths on both sides that augur well for the successful development of the relationship.

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