Contextualizing Distance Business and Management Education: a Case of the UK Open University and IIM LINK in Russia

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Although a body of research on technology-enhanced learning continues to grow, studies that closely examine issues and approaches to cross-cultural contextualisation of distance programmes and courses are relatively scarce (Means, et al., 2009). Strategic partnership between the Open University Business School (OUBS) in the UK and the International Institute of Management (IIM) LINK in Russia, which marks a 20-year anniversary this year, presents a context where more analysis of successful practice in this area can be undertaken. OUBS is the largest business school in Europe in terms of student numbers and a considerable proportion of its students are studying through the network of regional centres in Russia and in other countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) that is being coordinated by IIM LINK. This paper explores examples of contextualization at three levels: level of learning design and learning materials, level of teaching materials and practices and level of bespoke events for OUBS/ IIM LINK students and alumni. It also analyses approaches to embedding information and communication technologies (ICTs) into contextualization and their significance for enhancing distance teaching and learning practices in the age of global connectivity.

The paper argues that the process of cross-cultural contextualization is far from being straightforward even when both institutions teach courses of virtually the same content and when their organizational structures are in many ways similar. It requires both profound understanding of educational systems and national and professional cultures of the countries involved in cross-border distance programme delivery and fostering of grass-roots initiatives and practices that allow for continuous improvement of distance teaching and learning practices. The paper calls for more collaborative approaches to distance and e-learning design that are sensitive to the needs of diverse student populations operating in cultural contexts other than those, where distance educational programmes were originally designed.

1. Introduction

Although a body of research on technology-enhanced learning continues to grow, studies that closely examine issues and approaches to cross-cultural contextualisation of distance programmes and courses are relatively scarce (Means, et al., 2009). Strategic partnership between the Open University Business School (OUBS) in the UK and the International Institute of Management (IIM) LINK in Russia marks a 20-year anniversary this year and presents a context where more analysis in this area can be undertaken.

OUBS is part of the Open University in the UK, the only specialised distance learning university in the country. Today the school attracts more than a third of all UK part-time Business and Management students (HESA, 2011) and is also the largest business school in Europe in terms of student numbers. Except students based in the UK and other European Union (EU) countries, a proportion of its students are studying in Russia and in other countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) through a network of regional centres, that is being coordinated by IIM LINK.

Because a range of OUBS programmes are taught in the FSU region from Bachelor in Business Administration (BABS) to Master of Business Administration (MBA), there is a considerable experience of contextualizing distance teaching and learning to both the conditions of wider

national management and educational cultures and to the needs of a particular region or student group. This paper aims to discuss examples of different types of contextualisation and suggests the implications that these might have for further research on the subject. Except drawing on practitioner insights on collaborative provision that both authors of the paper have gained after years of work in the institutions in question, two recent empirical research studies have informed the discussion. The first study aimed to explore international student expectations and experiences of the first weeks of study in a sample of 23 OUBS students 11 of whom were enrolled into Russian versions of their modules. A series of open-ended face-to-face and telephone interviews in a semi-structured format were conducted and their transcripts are currently being analysed. The questions looked to tap into learner conceptions of distance and e-learning enhanced by ICTs and perceived relationships with their tutors and fellow students. The second project carried out at IIM LINK, explored learner experiences from the perspective of senior tutors. A total of six IIM LINK tutors with an average of 17.5 years of experience of tutoring in the context in question were interviewed in-depth. A mismatch between OUBS learning and teaching design and IIM LINK student expectations was the key interview theme.

2. OUBS Programmes in the Russian Context

OUBS uses practice-based approach in the design and delivery of its academic programmes, where student are encouraged to analyse the relevance of theoretical models and frameworks suggested in the course materials in the light of their professional practice and through online discussions and collaborations with other students and the tutor. Didactic and teacher-centred teaching practices are rare and there is division of labour between authors of learning materials locally based tutors, who are responsible for course delivery, facilitation of student learning and assessment of their written work.

Historically Russian tradition of higher education goes back to classic universities of XVIII-XIX centuries, which were largely modelled on classic German universities. Both early Russian universities and higher education institutions that emerged in the Soviet era stressed memorisation and exposure to theoretical material. Even *zaochnoe* education, one of the forms of correspondence study that emerged in the 1930s, was organised around intensive face-to-face sessions, where lectures material was delivered by the teacher and oral exams played a major role (Gustyr, 2006). Due to proliferation of teacher-centred activities (e.g. lectures, teacher-led seminars etc.), before 1990s peer, collaborative learning and reflection were not integrated into curricula of Russian higher education institutions.

Thus the delivery of practice-based OUBS curriculum with its emphasis on peer collaboration and reflection was a new phenomenon when it was first introduced into Russian education in the 1990s. Contextualisation at various levels was necessary and it occurred at three main levels – *level of learning and teaching materials; level of teaching and learning practices and level of bespoke events for IIM LINK students and alumni*. The next section looks at three types of contextualisation in more detail.

3. Approaches to Contextualisation

 a) *Learning and teaching materials;*

While one might expect significant adaptation of teaching and learning materials it is at the level of learning and teaching content, where relatively little space for contextualisation is possible. Requirements of international and national quality assurance bodies (e.g. EQUIS, QAA in the UK etc.) and quality assurance mechanisms at the institutional level ensure that regardless of student geographical location and language of study student learning experiences roughly are

equivalent to those of their peers based elsewhere. This is reflected in forms and methods of assessment which are very similar across the OUBS/ IIM LINK network.

One way of enabling diversity of perspectives in curriculum design, is using critical readers, some of whom come from OUBS partner institutions, including IIM LINK. The role of critical readers is that of external experts, who are familiar both with the OUBS teaching and learning model and with business and educational contexts of their respective countries and who ensure that differences in learner characteristics and their contexts in which they work are reflected in course design. Critical readers also comment on the degree to which a particular theoretical framework can be applicable in different cultural contexts and offer their own examples to be included in course materials.

b) *Teaching and learning practices*

As tuition on OUBS modules is delivered by locally-based tutors, there is wide scope for contextualizing teaching and learning practices at the tutor group level, particularly in contexts, which are considerably different from those where course materials were originally designed..

One way of making tuition more relevant to student own contexts is to offer practical examples (e.g. in the form of case studies) that shed more light on theoretical material that the course offers. To bring these case studies to relevance for IIM LINK students a number of different approaches are being used, such as:

- Developing case materials based on real-life examples of Russian business, using various sources (e.g. www.rbc.ru and www.expert.ru);
- Writing case-studies that use cultural material that is familiar to students, i.e. characters from fiction or movies. For example, one of the case studies offered to IIM LINK students uses Sherlock Holmes as the fictional character, who is both instantly recognized by students and whose managerial activities are under analysis in the case. This invokes a strong emotional response from Russian students and leads them to consider creative response to own work situations.
- Developing case-studies relevant to a specific sector of business or type of organization, that receive relatively little attention in the course materials, e.g. small and medium enterprises, agriculture, local potter workmanship etc. The advantage of these case studies is that due to their limited scope they can potentially appeal to students working in these types of organisations/ industry.

One other method of addressing student needs and developing more generic skills, such as skills of interpersonal communication, presentation, critical analysis, leadership skills etc. is offering additional face-to-face classes in the form of tutorials or Residential Schools. While the extent to which additional tuition is built into course experiences varies from one Regional centre to another, additional face-to-face sessions perform an important function of introducing students to UK educational system and new type of learning.

Another form of contextualization occurs in terms of ICT use. While OUBS students based in the UK and in other EU countries mostly make use of learning tools and technologies (e.g. online forums, Wikis, blogs etc.) asynchronously, i.e. at the time suitable to them, it is online real-time sessions that are becoming increasingly pervasive in the IIM LINK network. Instant feedback, better sense of social presence and suitability to cover certain subjects (i.e. presenting and discussing examples of financial problems etc.) make online audio sessions to be particularly useful, but the time taken to train both tutors and students in key functions of the chosen platform creates impediments to its wider acceptance. However, live audio interaction is fast

becoming an indispensable feature of new tutor training programmes at IIM LINK and an important channel for cross-institutional communication and collaboration (i.e. at the level of course teams, research groups or individual projects) between OUBS and IIM LINK.

c) Level of bespoke events for IIM LINK students and alumni.

Bespoke events are organized by IIM LINK and are used for a number of purposes - from marketing to enhancing tuition on OUBS modules and developing alumni network. The focus of these events is typically on student own initiative and interests, e.g. organizing competitions, such as "Murphy's Laws of Business Education" or visits for tutorials/ examination revision to student groups other regional centres. ICT mediated interaction in various modes during these sessions also plays an increasingly important role in shaping communities of practice locally in a specific region of the FUS and across the IIM LINK regional network.

To sum up, this paper discussed most pervasive approaches to contextualizing Business and Management education in the context of Open University Business School programmes in Russia and other former Soviet countries, drawing on both practical experience of the authors and on provisional results of empirical analysis. It provided examples of good practice and specified the challenges of integrating new teaching and learning approaches in a new cultural context. In an age of growing connectivity levels globally and opportunities to access educational content, including Open Education Resources (OERs), from virtually any corner of the planet, in theory the opportunities for creating truly global distance education programmes are unparalleled. However, as evidence of collaboration described above shows even well-established partnerships require significant effort in terms of contextualizing teaching and learning content, adapting learning and teaching practices from both the methodological and technological perspectives to a new context and fostering creativity and local initiative to make new type of educational provision successful and sustainable.

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