

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Strategic management has been growing rapidly, due to ongoing demand for strategic thinkers from both public and private sectors. When several business schools offer strategic management programs in the transnational education format, it is obviously viewed as a complex site of management (Otten, 2003; Leask, 2008), which is deemed to be distinct from what and how one teaches and learns in home universities (Debowski, 2005; Lamers & Admiraal, 2018). In this paper, we explore learning and teaching experiences of students and instructors in the strategic management education programs from Australia and Singapore. We focus on what they identified as challenges in learning in the transnational context. The analysis confirms that issues related to curriculum, cross-cultural communication, and expectation in learning and teaching are among the key challenges for students in the TNHE program. This paper confirms that quality of the TNHE program will be created when both host and home institutions co-create equal values for staff and students and exchange them across border.

Keywords: Strategic Management Education, Transnational Education, TNHE Program

INTRODUCTION

Most business schools that offer Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) programs explain various challenges in the management of programs and quality. Some of the challenging issues include learning and teaching activities such as visiting academic staff from the partnered institutions, exchange programs, virtual teamwork, and staff-student exchange. These activities can help students to understand and build their cross-cultural competencies (Joy & Poonamallee, 2013). There is still a need to define and understand the challenges that stimulate students in the TNHE program to learn cross-cultural skills with their teachers and peers from the local and overseas. What remain unclear is what are the key challenges to promote learning in the TNHE context. Management of learning and teaching strategic management in the TNHE can be a real challenge for institutions in both home and host countries, especially with leadership and governance (Bovill, 2015; Stafford & Taylor, 2016). Literature in higher education and international education management suggest a number of problems related to learning and teaching including the contextual challenges of mutual expectations and diverse epistemologies of knowledge generation, deep disciplinary knowledge creation, and student-centred pedagogies (Otten, 2003; Zhou, Knoke & Sakamoto, 2005; Lamers & Admiraal, 2018). There is, however, little empirical evidence regarding the extent to which such challenges are felt by staff and little is known about the practices that staff adopt to improve learning and teaching (Lamers & Admiraal, 2018).

The TNHE landscape is a complex one, with multiple stakeholders, each having different perceptions, expectations and motivations. Differing starting points and expectations have spawned a vibrant and diverse range of engagement models. Some have been more successful than others, but all have contributed to the rich fabric of international higher education and in most cases benefited their stakeholders either directly or indirectly. In most circumstances, one may expect graduates from TNHE programs to be competent in dealing with and managing cross-cultural issues. Although a variety of TNHE programs in business

and management include cross-cultural management courses for their students, little systematic research exists on the approach in learning and teaching that create and sustain graduates' cross-cultural competencies (Johnson, Lenartowicz & Apud, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2013; Bovill, Jordan & Watters, 2015).

Another potential challenge teaching staff may experience in the TNHE environment is the provision of curriculum (Dobos, 2011), which still sparks heated debates over the best design for delivery practice. One view advocates for an institutional ethnocentric approach with fixed and unmediated curricula, imposing the standards matching those of the exporting universities (Debowski, 2008). It is thought that students deliberately engage with a Western degree because they wish to receive an insight into Western outlook and practices (Dunn & Wallace, 2006), expecting difference in what and how they are taught (Ziguras, 2008). Yet, this approach is criticised to take form of a "cultural colonialism" that transfers Western theories and products indiscriminately to the transnational environment (Ziguras, 2008). Equity pedagogy is purported to be a process that empowers students to develop competencies so they can function effectively in society (McGee, Banks & Banks, 1995; Saint-Hilaire, 2014). This requires educators to have an integrated and contextual knowledge encompassing multicultural, pedagogical and socio-cultural dimensions that reflect the complexity of real-life interactions and relationships.

METHODOLOGY: A CASE STUDY

This case study aims to explore the experiences of different stakeholders in an Australian-Singapore transnational undergraduate strategic management and international business program. The study, hence, draws on phenomenology theory to explore the nature of transnational programmes from the diverse perspectives (Zhou, 2005; Cohen, 2007), namely students and academic teaching staff. With the focus being on the participants' personal knowledge and assumptions taken at face value, this study aimed to celebrate individual views and interpretation of their lived experiences. A case study methodology was seen as most appropriate to investigate the research agenda as it retains "the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 2003). We selected a TNHE business undergraduate program from an Australian University, due to its experiences in the international education market. This TNHE program has a strong partnership with a Singaporean institution for nearly two decades. Currently, over 1,000 students enrol in this program. We contacted the home institution (an Australian) and requested collaboration from both program managers (in Singapore and Australia). A total of 28 students in the TNHE business undergraduate program (comprising 14 females [7 from Melbourne, 7: Singapore] and 14 male students [7 from Melbourne, 7: Singapore] who were aged over twenty-one years) participated in this study. All interviews took place in small focus group discussions. All students in this study are in their final year.

FINDINGS

The Management and Design of Strategic Management Curriculum

Strategic management education requires people with experiences and resources to develop content, pedagogy, and assessment in the TNHE context. This idea can be adapted to the local context was mentioned by all students in this study. This issue is more prominent among students from the host country institution because they are the recipient of the Australian curriculum. There are issues on clarity of the Australian business and social context in the curriculum, its relevance to Singapore, and adaptability of their Australian teachers. There is no clear agreement among students and their local and international

teachers on the proportion of local and international content in the strategic management course design.

All prescribed textbooks and cases are mainly from the North America. It was quite obvious among many students who participated in this study that the inclusion of local and Southeast Asian business and strategies is pivotal for them as students in the TNHE program.

“It was great when the course include various strategies from the international companies. I learnt a great deal from those examples and stories.” (Singaporean Student, Male)

Getting course co-designed by local strategists and or corporate can be helpful for the quality of the course and program. The design of curriculum that promotes engagement among various organisations can benefit students to think outside textbook. Getting representatives from the industry to engage in the design of strategic management education program can provide a new way to look at learning and practicing strategies. Issue on assessment was mentioned frequently as one of the challenges for students in both locations. Students in Australia revealed that they prefer to be assessed by their local teachers because of their perceived quality. This view is opposite from their Singaporean counterparts who seem to be more flexible. In fact, students from Singapore focus on the types of assessment that are related to their learning activities. Although the common teaching method in the TNHE is still a combination of face-to-face lecture with some virtual classes with their international peers, Singaporean students in this case study prefer to work with their local teachers for all assessments. Students in the program suggested that “the joint curricular design” approach should be implemented in the program. They refer to the engagement among teachers from both countries to ensures closer academic cooperation as curriculum design and delivery. The process will help them to learn effectively.

Gender in Strategic Management Education

Strategic management is perceived as an amalgamation of science and art of management. Gender issues become the key element when the program is delivered in the transnational education context. The issues regarding on gender equity, leadership, strategy in learning and teaching were examined among participants in this study. Also, the extent to which male, female, and LGBTIQ+ students in the program communicated when they explore strategic thinking. Fair treatment as in equity among students in the programs as well as ability to participate, have their voices and opinions counted in the strategic management learning were addressed as one of the key gender issues among participants in this study.

“We discussed how women and men compete in the strategic arena. While discussing this point in the class, we learnt to be mindful about gender in the classroom.” (Female student, Singaporean)

“As a male instructor, I understand that we need to justify gender equality mindset and practices as strategy for corporates as part of our learning and teaching experiences.” (Male Instructor, Australia)

For most participants in this study, they see the importance of strategic management education that addresses the importance of gender diversity in management. Also, they were keen to look at what transformational leadership can look like in the transnational context to promote gender diversity, inclusion and equity in complex organisations, both for profit and not-for-profit organisations. Learning and teaching materials for strategic management education in the transnational context require sensitivity and great details on gender diversity. This point includes all forms and delivery since the nature of TNHE can be flexible. Hence, the virtual or face-to-face issue and their relationship with gender sensitivity in the areas of gender diversity and inclusiveness in strategic management.

Learning and Teaching Expectation

We found that students in the TNHE programs do have different expectation in the learning and teaching process. Students based in Australia tended to focus on learning activities and learning outcomes from the activities designed by the teaching team, more so than their Singapore peers. Most students from Australia (both local and international students) referred to the innovative culture of cross-cultural pedagogy that is reflected in its design and delivery. This difference could be attributed to differences in epistemologies of learning. The innovative culture in teaching and learning of cross-cultural management where students and tutors are required to engage with two-way reciprocal adaptation (Volet & Jones, 2012) can equip students and staff with new experiences and approaches (*i.e.*, immersion in intercultural interactions; two-way dialogue; personal transformation), although Reid & Garson (2017) debate the level of positive intercultural interactions through intercultural learning.

“As a result of workgroup participation, it is believed we developed a greater understanding of the ways in which others interpret situations and how cultural differences can have an impact on perceptions. This hurt us in the earlier weeks, but as we began to understand what everyone’s individual needs and preferences were we began to work together more effectively. In developing greater communication skills, it is believed the level of conflict will decrease, in turn reducing miscommunication. We have learnt to be more tolerant of our differences... Our employment in an organisation will now be aided.”(Male student, Australian)

We also learnt from the tutors in the program that activities in the classroom that focus on learning, rather than teaching, are rated as important for students to improve their cross-cultural skills in business. Students reported that simulation, business games and activities that replicate cross-cultural scenarios can support students when adapting to new cultural contexts. The learning activities that engaged students from the two diverse locations to work together were also found to reduce ethnocentrism among this cohort of students. Students reflected upon the open nature of TNHE where they were required to interact with students from culturally and contextually different countries whilst simultaneously working on the same ideas and task. Their ability to provide feedback to their international counterparts, as previously reported, promoted their understanding on cross-cultural communication and negotiation. They also dealt with cross-cultural conflicts and management with their colleagues and tutors. In the reflections of their experiences of working with team members from other countries and campus, most students in the program agree that because of the support given by their tutors, and assessment requirements they were progressively feeling more at ease in culturally diverse environments.

“Feedback on the assessment was crucial as it allowed each part of the assessment to be evaluated by the group. This meant that everyone in the group had an opinion on each part and if the group felt any part of the assessment was under-par it could be modified. (Male student, Singapore)

DISCUSSION

This case study confirms that contextualising the local and international context is crucial in the management of TNHE, if students are to develop cross-cultural competencies. The data suggests that equal integration of experiences, practices and processes in the host environment with experiences, practices and processes in the home environment will assist the attainment of teaching and learning outcomes. We learn from this study that gender

inclusive curricula, pedagogy and voices from both local and international strategists will help students in the TNHE program to develop their strategic thinking and management competency. Strategic management education that is mutually designed by business delegates, strategists, and teachers from both host and home countries will better improve student's learning ability and global strategic thinking mindset and skills. Real life cases or stories in strategic management resulted in transportable, transferable and culturally relevant curriculum; improved student engagement through application of educational technologies; validation of cultural diversity in organisational practice; and curriculum expansion that applied diverse examples across contexts.

As internationalisation and TNHE can raise issues of equity and parochialism (Ottens, 2003), particularly when group composition is diverse, an equity teaching and learning paradigm was applied to meet these challenges. This paper confirms that curriculum, content, method of learning and teaching in strategic management must be designed from the experienced local and international perspectives. This issue will promote visionary strategic management learners from both local and international education context.

Though strategic management education is complex in itself, it is suggested that more effort from the course designers should be spent when the program is delivered in the transnational context, it clearly demands mutual understanding among home and host staff. Indeed, strategic management education in the TNHE context will equip each student with a unique local experience which has the potential to create global citizens who have tailored their education experiences to their specific emerging professional and scholarly interests.

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