

Continuous Improvement Through the Development and Use of a Content Exam in a Sino-American Dual Degree Business Program

Justin W. Evans

Georgia Southern University, USA

Mary C. Martin

Fort Hays State University, USA

Abstract. Of the many contexts in which the assessment of student learning proves challenging, one of the most vexing is the cross-border dual degree program. This paper examines the efforts of one U.S. business school to build continuous improvement and assurance of learning processes into its dual degree Bachelor of Business Administration program shared with a partner university in the People's Republic of China. A testing instrument was developed in-house by the faculty of the U.S. partner and administered to students in China, with some students taking an English-language version and others taking a Mandarin version. The authors compare the performance of the two sets of students and consider why comparable learning appears to have been elusive, particularly with respect to language barriers. The authors reflect on the implications for assurance of learning in the context of cross-border dual degree programs, particularly in light of the most crucial contextual factors that must inform the design and enhancement of such programs.

Keywords: assurance of learning; cross-border programs, dual degree programs, China.

1. Introduction

The assessment of student learning is challenging even under conventional circumstances (Bacon and Stewart 2017), but when business education is delivered across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries, additional difficulties are sure to arise. What, for instance, is a business school to do when a significant disparity appears between the quality of learning amongst its domestic students and those whom it educates overseas? Context will be central to any answer.

Context is a vitally important but often overlooked dimension of both student learning and business education scholarship (Egri 2013). International activities

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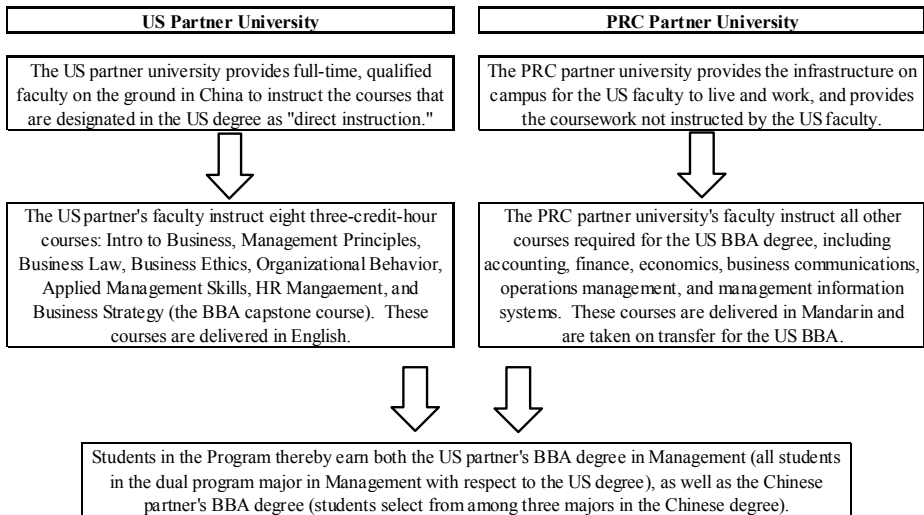
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within and among universities have proliferated in the era of globalization. Of the many contexts in which assessment proves challenging, one of the most vexing is the cross-border dual degree program. *Cross-border education* “refers to the movement of education ... across national [or] regional jurisdictional or geographic borders” (Knight 2007: 2), and thus, *cross-border programs* involve formal partnerships between universities located in two or more countries for purposes of educational exchange. These arrangements can assume myriad forms, one of which is the *dual degree program*, in which graduates earn two degrees—one from their “home” institution and the other from the “foreign” institution (Helms 2014: 6). Students in these programs enjoy many benefits, including access to foreign content, resources, and methodologies, and improved intercultural communication and cooperative skills (Cuiming *et al.* 2012). Partner institutions enjoy the acquisition of foreign knowledge and revenue streams but must also coordinate with one another, which can be highly complex (Cuiming *et al.* 2012). And indeed, in assurance of learning (AOL), the development of effective relationships between partners is arguably the most important groundwork (Heffernan & Poole 2005). In addition to the logistical and strategic challenges that these programs entail in complex markets such as China (Alon & Fleet 2009), universities must also build, maintain, and measure their students’ academic success.

This paper examines the efforts of one U.S. business school to build continuous improvement and AOL processes into its dual degree Bachelor of Business Administration program (the program) shared with a partner university in the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China). The basic logistics of the program are summarized in Figure 1. In short, the U.S. partner posts qualified faculty on-ground in China to instruct most of the core business courses required for the U.S. degree, while other coursework is taken through the PRC partner’s faculty and is then transferred in satisfaction of the remaining U.S. degree requirements. Nearly all students in the program are Chinese nationals who remain in China for the entire four-year course of study—an arrangement popularly termed a “4+0 program” (Hanover Research Council 2009: 10).

More specifically, this paper reports the results from a testing instrument developed “in-house” by the faculty of the U.S. partner in an effort to better understand the areas in which its PRC students were found to have underperformed, and to better assess the reasons why comparable learning appears not to have taken place. We test a likely culprit—language barriers—and consider other significant factors to appropriately contextualize our discussion of the language implications for AOL in cross-border dual degree programs. AOL should incorporate both direct and indirect measures of student learning and, commensurate with AACSB’s evolving standards, must also be faculty-driven and assess the knowledge and skills that graduates possess (Pringle & Michel 2007).

Figure 1: Visual Synopsis of the Program's Basic Logistics



While no single instrument can suffice for a program's assessment, a business school is wise to take language as its starting point in the design of AOL for any cross-border program in which different native languages prevail. To the extent that students cannot understand the substance of a course (or an exam) on account of language difficulties, no other improvements are likely to be impactful. Accordingly, the in-house exam reported here was designed to discern whether any statistically significant differences exist between students' performance based on language.

2. Assurance of Learning, Continuous Improvement, and the Program

2.1. Assurance of Learning and Continuous Improvement

Following AACSB (2013: 4) and Palomba and Banta (1999), AOL refers to "[t]he systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development." AOL is important because it enables the business school to enhance "curricula when deficiencies or opportunities for improvement are found" (AACSB 2013: 3). A business school can "close the loop" by reflecting on the data, identifying changes to improve student learning, and implementing such changes (Rexeisen & Garrison 2013: 284). AOL also helps business schools

to address retention and their accountability to external stakeholders (Weldy & Turnipseed 2010). In sum, the AOL process endeavors to measure student learning and thereby implement improvements.

The topic of AOL in cross-border programs is timely in light of the proliferation of international initiatives (see, e.g., Cuiming *et al.* 2012: 293), intensified competition among universities that offer international programs (Henderson *et al.* 2017), and the imperative to globalize business education (AACSB 2011). The impact of Asia's development on business education (Lim 2014) reinforces this topic's timeliness, as do certain dynamics between China and the U.S., including national-level tensions (Holland & Martina 2018), the constraints imposed on American programs in China (Redden 2016), and the influence that China is exerting on American campuses (Bauman 2018) and elsewhere (Redden 2018).

Moreover, the quality of instruction and experience of business faculty are identified as the leading challenges to management education in China today (Wolf & Lof 2013: 260). The specter of "diploma mills" in China thus arises (Wolf & Lof 2013: 260). At the same time, China's government has prioritized quality in Chinese-foreign educational programs (Özturgut 2013), but with few systems in place for the assessment of undergraduate program quality (Jiang 2013). These circumstances, combined with a trend toward credentialism, mean that assessment—and the ability of the program partners to coordinate with one another (Wolf & Lof 2013: 260-261)—are even more central to the program's success.

The AOL process has been aptly described from the programmatic vantage of AACSB (see, e.g., Lakhali & Sévigny 2015), and is not restated here. One must first decide on the purpose of an assessment, and then design the assessment to fit that purpose (Earl 2003: 19). An assessment's purpose is ultimately tied to the program's learning goals and objectives (AACSB 2013: 6-13). The substance and logistics of AOL can be pursued in a variety of ways but must have buy-in from faculty, and the literature reflects a healthy debate concerning how business schools can best undertake such assessment within the framework of the AACSB accreditation standards (see, e.g., Marques & Garrett 2012; Zhu & Fleming 2017).

2.2. The Program

The ETS Major Field Test (MFT) has been deemed an appropriate assessment tool for use in business programs outside the United States, including those in Asia (Ling 2013). Although critics question the extent to which the MFT reflects student learning (e.g., Green *et al.* 2014), the MFT is nevertheless widely used and embraced as a valid assessment instrument, provided that the exam is