



TRANSFERRING WESTERN MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE TO CHINA

Mahmood Zaidi and **Thomas Norman** report on how team teaching and virtual international student teams have proved vital ingredients in a successful international EMBA



China's recent economic performance has been extraordinary. It has driven a considerable increase in demand for management talent in both foreign and domestic firms at every level—from supervisors to CEOs. In this kind of environment skill shortages can be a major bottleneck for economic growth. The Chinese government has devoted a significant amount of effort and financial resources to developing management education, including forging many partnership with foreign MBA programmes.

The MBA has its origins in the US but it is now recognised worldwide as an effective way to develop an internationally competitive pool of managers. The traditional MBA, as well as Executive MBA programmes designed for more seasoned leaders, have been introduced relatively recently in China but they have matured quite quickly.

One Executive MBA programme of note takes an innovative approach, which respects the character of the Chinese environment and the skills of Chinese faculty by marrying their best practices with those of the faculty from a major American research university. The schools involved are the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management and Sun Yat-sen University's Lingnan (University) College. The programme is unique by virtue of two combined features: team teaching and virtual international student teams. This was the first EMBA programme in China taught in English in which all courses are led by faculty members representing schools from both countries.

This programme was among the first batch of joint initiatives approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Academic Degree Committee of the State Council in 1999. The EMBA programme in China was part of the American school's strategy to establish a constellation of three or four EMBA programmes in partnership with top business schools abroad. It built upon knowledge from the Carlson School's "partnered EMBA programmes" in Austria and Poland with, respectively, Vienna University of Economics and Business and the Warsaw School of Economics.

The mission of the China EMBA programme was to provide comprehensive, market-based business management education to Chinese managers and entrepreneurs. Students attended weekend classes twice each month on the Chinese school's campus over a two-year period. The language of instruction was English. Carlson's Executive MBA programme was used as a basis for quality control of the programme and the standards for selecting Chinese faculty, students, examinations and grading were identical to the American programme. Finally, the teaching performance of the American faculty in the Chinese programme was part of their annual evaluation.

One of the key features of this EMBA programme, team teaching, has been used for a long time in other disciplines but its use in management education is relatively recent. Team teaching forces faculty members to adjust their course planning and classroom management as they collaborate to meet learning objectives.

The faculty of both schools jointly developed each course with individuals from Carlson acting as lead. American faculty were responsible for working with counterparts in China on the development of the syllabus, course design, grading and reporting the final course grades to the registrar of University of Minnesota. This type of team teaching approach was a new idea in the Chinese classroom.

The use of team teaching was appropriate for a number of reasons.

First, there is a demand for indigenisation of management education in China. Students and employers are demanding the use of "China-context specific" cases in Western EMBA programmes. Using teaching teams composed of a faculty member from both Carlson and Lingnan is ideal for this situation as it allows the programme to adapt its curriculum to the local cultural and business environment.



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Second, faculty members of both schools are enriched by the transfer of knowledge that takes place both inside and outside the classroom. Team teaching thus leads to the professional development of the faculty of both schools.

Lingnan faculty members were able to observe how management education is delivered in a market-based economy such as the US. Carlson faculty benefitted by gaining up-to-date knowledge about management practices in China.

This "train-the-trainer" approach helps expand management knowledge in several ways. Faculty members from both institutions can use their newly acquired skills in teaching their students, share new knowledge with their students and develop global and multicultural perspectives in teaching and research.

Recent studies report that both faculty and students regard team teaching as a great success. One study found significant improvement in student achievement in team-taught EMBA courses. This may occur because students are receiving different teaching approaches and perspectives on topics.

The second important feature of the Chinese EMBA programme is the use of global, virtual student teams. The teams were formed in the second year of the programme and consisted of a mix of EMBA students from this programme along with the Carlson's local EMBA class and its partnered EMBA programmes in Poland and Austria.

Under the guidance of a faculty member from each business school, each virtual team was required to develop a business plan for a new product or service for an overseas market. At the end of the programme, a two-week international residency required of all the EMBA students was hosted at the Carlson School campus.

71%

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During the residency, the previously formed international teams presented their assigned case, made site visits to American companies, attended classes, built their own international networks and participated in university graduation ceremonies.

The use of virtual teams inculcates three important skills needed by executives: developing a learning community; improving collaboration; and knowing the processes involved in the co-construction of knowledge.

Learning in virtual teams is continually evolving. A survey of the Chinese EMBA programme's graduates indicated that students appreciated the opportunity of working in diverse teams and learning how to work collaboratively to solve problems.

As they learned how to work effectively in their virtual teams, they bonded across four cultures. This is a benefit to China, as large employers value employees with the skills needed to work in multicultural teams.

The first seven cohorts of the Chinese EMBA programme graduated 32 students per year on average. About half of them responded to a survey on the effectiveness of the programme and the unique features of team teaching and virtual team collaboration.



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Demographically, survey respondents were enrolled with a bachelor's degree or its equivalent and were largely from the Pearl River Delta region. They were divided between senior leaders (president, director, regional manager) and middle managers. Most of them worked for state-owned enterprises (SOEs), multinational companies or were entrepreneurs. Nearly all of them had 10 or more years of work experience with an average of 14 years of overall work experience and six years with their current employer. Just under one-third were female.

Nearly all graduates felt that their "overall experience with the programme was satisfactory" and a high number (71%) felt their programme was a top EMBA programme in China. A larger majority of these students expected to add important people to their network via the EMBA.

The virtual student team project was an important design element in meeting these expectations and, after graduation, a majority of students reported satisfaction with the quality of people added to their network from their classes. The team teaching method was praised by more than 80% of the graduates.

Graduates were also asked to "compare their expected and perceived returns on their investment in this EMBA degree". About half were satisfied or very satisfied with the "cost-to-benefit ratio" of their EMBA degree. Less than one-tenth were dissatisfied. The graduates felt that the most important attributes of the programme were teaching quality and overall instructor quality.

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FURTHER READING

Cohen, Malcolm S and Zaidi, Mahmood A (2002), *Global Skill Shortages*, North Hampton, MA: Edward Edgar Publishing Inc.

Zaidi, Mahmood A and Norman, Thomas A, (2013), "Transferring Western Management Knowledge to China: Perceptions of Graduates from an American Executive MBA Program, *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, 7(1): 82-105



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Overall, faculty members from the Carlson School were perceived as having a positive attitude toward teaching. They also were rated higher on communication skills and expertise in international business. Local Chinese professors were considered superior in their expertise on Chinese business.

Both faculty types scored well on showing respect to students.

In summary, this EMBA programme has created a decade of students generally satisfied with their studies who subsequently advanced in their careers in terms of promotion and compensation as they help to build the Chinese economy.

The graduates noted that the team teaching philosophy and the use of virtual international student teams were valuable experiences. Executives who completed this EMBA degree were satisfied with their educational experience and found both the first hand and virtual experiences with instructors and students from different cultures helped them to build their professional network globally.

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