Learning through an international partnership

MARK WHITTINGTON, BUSINESS SCHOOL
A story drawing on the Business School’s partnership with South China Normal University (SCNU) in Guangzhou.

We arrived, chatted, met students, were introduced to local sights and culture. We learned.

- The role of parents in decision making
- A very different exam system for entry to University
- Students seemed very quiet
  - We started to realise that we had unquestioned priors in our teaching and learning frameworks
Step 1 – 2+2

- Agreed a 2+2 – 2 years in SCNU before moving to Abdn
  - Needed “decent” year 2 results and English
  - Awarded a degree from Aberdeen
  - We would visit SCNU twice a year to engage with the students
- The students who came to Aberdeen
  - Had a “special” mentor / tutor, keeping more of an eye
  - They did ok, adjustment to Abdn and our teaching style seemed tough
  - Around 20 students per year
- We also had academic visitors from SCNU
Step 2 – “2”+2

- The next stage was a “2”+2 where
  - Higher entry requirement
  - BS staff travelled to SCNU & taught 1/3rd of Y1 & Y2 courses
    - We aimed to facilitate learning in an Aberdeen way
      - Shorter classes, though
    - We devised a “buddy system” of working alongside an SCNU lecturer on each of our courses
    - Students received an award from both SCNU and Aberdeen
  - Grown to 80 students in year 1 with around 40-45 both able and deciding to come to Aberdeen
    - Also teach years 3 & 4 at SCNU to those who don’t come
The “buddy” system

- Originally suggested by SCNU as part of their staff development
- We wanted it to be seen as equals – hence the “buddy” idea
  - **Students** - had someone to ask questions to in Chinese
  - They had less reticence to ask questions to the buddy
  - **Abdn staff** - someone who stopped us from making cultural /organisational mistake (learned when we got it wrong....)
  - Much more feedback (e.g., “talking too fast”) than otherwise
  - The buddy could “translate” or interpret both ways
  - **Buddy** - A positive cultural & learning experience for them too
- It built friendships too
Teaching reflections

- Teaching in Guangzhou
  - Attendance is very high!
  - They are used to full, long days (but with a two hour lunch break)
  - Finding what made the students laugh took a while....
  - Before & after the main delivery week, provide online sessions & the buddy would do some face-to-face work
- I teach accounting and finance
  - Takes a while to help them understand that the concepts and words matter at least as much as the numbers
  - Numbers are derived from frameworks with priors
Reflective conclusions

- Fortunate to form lasting relationships with people who have stayed in key roles throughout the 14 years.
  - Development of trust & the ability to say tough things
  - We listened to their understanding of their organisational/ govt changes & sought to find win-wins
- Students who had met UoA staff, experienced UoA-style teaching seemed to acclimatise better to UK study
  - Also helped them realise why the English level was so important
- The alumni in Guangzhou are very proud of their achievement & their relationship with us
An Abdn – SCNU Alumni meet-up
Broader reflections

- Initial 2 years of the new “2”+2 took some courage
- Some things are not testable by statistics
  - Using stories & cases, a good way to learn from successes & mistakes
- Cultures do not stay the same
  - Government and organisational priorities also change
    - Chinese government policy changes were a driver
    - Migration can widen mindsets and reduce “othering”
- We state we are an explicitly international university
  - Changing us as well as changing those who learn from us.
    - We embrace elements of their cultures as they embrace ours