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Getting Serious About Educating Property Professionals from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds

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Abstract: The discipline of "Property" has been addressed from a business, economics and finance perspective in the United States for many decades. This approach has largely supplanted, or at least significantly supplemented, the built environment tradition stemming mainly from the United Kingdom. The language of "global property" is therefore English, and its cultural traditions Western. Yet each year, many students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and different cultures travel to Universities in North America, the United Kingdom and Australasia to learn about this "global property". Some wish to participate in global property markets, while others want to apply as much of what they learn as is useful within their own cultures. How adequately are they equipped to do so?

Recent research, media reports and the authors' own experience suggest that minimum IELTS scores are barely adequate for successful academic study, while the problems of the cultural context of business education are rarely addressed. Although content-based ESL has been advocated by practitioners in the field for over 15 years as one strategy for dealing with this issue, very few universities in Australia offer such courses for credit. This paper describes a collaborative approach adopted by the Property and the Business Communication Skills (NESB) staff in the School of International Business at the University of SA, to design a model of language, academic and cultural support for incoming Master of Business (Property) students for whom English is a second language. The majority of these students have graduated from Thammasat University (Bangkok, Thailand). This program comprises a month-long intensive English language and culture preparation course with Property-centric exercises, a Property-based ESL course (for credit), and an on-going commitment to the socio-linguistic needs of the Thai Postgraduate Property students.

Introduction

The University of South Australia (“the University”) is committed to “internationalisation”. Although there is no clearly defined “Internationalisation Policy”, Leask (1999) suggests that the concept is “embedded” in the University’s mission statement, goals and teaching. The University’s goals include “meeting the needs of all student groups, fostering responsible social and cultural analysis and to be recognized internationally for educating professionals, applying knowledge and serving the community (Leask 1999).

The University-wide move towards internationalisation was fostered by *The Delores Report* of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (1996) which articulated the role of education in developing regional and international harmony (Haw 1998, as cited in Page & Kupke 2001, p.3). From 1998, the University began to develop a set of “Graduate Qualities” which incorporated the ability to “demonstrate an international perspective as a professional and as a citizen” (University of South Australia 1999).

With or without a formal University policy, however, the Property program in the School of International Business has been encouraging cross-cultural exchanges for a significant period of time. For over 25 years, international students from a wide variety of countries (including Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Mauritius, Ghana, Samoa, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Denmark, Russia, USA and New Zealand) have undertaken Property programs at the University (formerly the South Australia Institute of Technology) (Page & Kupke 2000). In addition to the courses taught in Australia, Property staff members are involved in the offshore delivery of Property programs and courses at Thammasat University (Bangkok), Hong Kong Baptist University, and the Chambers Group (Singapore).

Page and Kupke (2000) assert that continuing internationalisation of the Property program is important for two reasons. “First, to assist (Australian) students to find career

opportunities outside South Australia; and second, to allow the Property Program to become more user-friendly and relevant for the large percentage of international students who undertake the course” (p. 5). It is the second criteria of internationalisation (the needs of international students) that this paper will address.

Why would international students from a Non-English Speaking Background undertake a property education in English?

As noted by a number of writers, most recently Yu (2001), Australian property education has tended to take from both the English built environment and building management traditions and the U.S. management, economics and finance school so well championed by Graaskamp (1976). More recently, these schools of thought have been seen in another guise with the various emphases on Facility Management, which concentrates on buildings and their technology, and Corporate Real Estate, which focuses on the organisation and its technology-enabled business operating strategies. These shades of emphasis both appear out of a Western, English-speaking tradition of property, and a fairly recent one at that, as noted by Small (2001).

The de-facto rise of international financial markets, international investment in property and the international location of corporations’ operations is commonly subsumed under the title “globalisation”. This has seen many developing countries undergoing a transformation of their property markets or, in countries such as Russia, undertaking the creation of a property market system in the Western mould. Sriboonjit and Rossini (2001) observed this phenomenon occurring in Thailand.

Swift and radical transformation or creation of property markets ideally calls for access to and application of successful models. The substantial majority of knowledge in the operation of property markets is only accessible to those who read and understand English, and have some understanding of the Western traditions from which it has come. Such an understanding of Western cultural background and its relationship to the local culture is likely to be important in successful adaptation of property market models to non-Western culture.

A further reason for undertaking a property education in English would appear to be a desire to gain employment in the international commercial property industry. This might be in working for international real estate organisations, or in managing property occupied by international firms or local firms with an international focus. In a study of three international office markets in Australia, Singapore and Thailand, it was found that the buildings and the technology take-up of the firms within them were not significantly different (Kooymans et al 1999).

At the University of South Australia and its antecedents, property has been taught from business schools, despite the University having had strong building/planning and architecture schools. There has been a strong emphasis on statistically based market analysis and the role of property in financial markets since the late 1970s. Such an emphasis was important to Thammasat University in selecting an Australian partner to help design an education program for Thai valuers. Education of a critical mass of valuers would underpin the World Bank initiative to create a Western-style system of property market information and asset valuation, giving confidence in asset values to direct property investors and to international investors on the Stock Exchange of Thailand.

Thammasat University (Bangkok)

Property staff from the University of South Australia began liaising with academic staff at Thammasat University (Bangkok) in 1996, to investigate ways to improve property education opportunities in Thailand. The Graduate Diploma in Property Valuation began in 1997 and was premised on a two-fold, five-year goal. One was to increase the number of professional valuers in Thailand, and the other was to develop a professional academic teaching unit of Thai nationals (Sriboonjit & Rossini 2000, p.1).

To achieve these goals, a team-teaching approach was adopted. The subjects in the Diploma are primarily taught by a University of South Australia academic, with summarising, occasional translation and interpretation provided by a Thai co-lecturer.

This model creates a less intimidating learning environment, ensures that material is clearly understood, and provides mentoring opportunities for the trainee Thai lecturer. Although the original goal had been to have materials delivered in Thai by Thai lecturers, the desire among significant numbers of students to learn at least some of the material in English ultimately resulted in the mixed language approach.

In 2000, a small number of graduates from Thammasat University applied for a transfer of credit to the University of South Australia Master of Business (Property) program. Given that the Graduate Diploma in Property Valuation (GPV) was derived from the Graduate Diploma in Property taught at the University of South Australia by the same staff that developed the GPV, it was deemed unreasonable not to grant the same one-year's credit in a two-year Masters program. The first intake of Thai students arrived in Adelaide in January 2000.

The entry requirements for students from a non English-speaking background

The University of South Australia has an entry policy (for all courses) based on a minimum IELTS (International English Language Test System) score of 6.00, or on the basis of the completion of one year of University study in English. Although components of the Thammasat program are taught in English and the students may opt to undertake some of their assessment in English for bonus marks, the Graduate Diploma in Property Valuation is not considered the equivalent of a year of University study in English.

According to the *Report of the English Language Services (ELS) Scoping Project*, an IELTS of 6.00 “places UniSA outside the national and international trend, which would typically place postgraduate entry in the range of 6.5-7.00 (Wajnryb 2000, p. 22). It has also been well documented in both academia (Pantelides 1999; Wajnryb 2000) and in the media (Rollison 2001) that a minimum IELTS is barely adequate for successful tertiary study. When students enter a tertiary program with less than 6.00, they face a significant risk of failing. The Director of the ELSSA center at the University of Technology, Sydney has said that an IELTS of 5.5 is “suicide” (as cited in Wajnryb 2000, p. 25).

Most Thammasat University students from the Graduate Diploma in Property Valuation had IELTS of 6.0 or the equivalent, but some had been admitted on the basis of interview demonstrating a “proficient” facility in English. Students varied widely in their ability to use and understand English in the context of post-graduate study, but their abilities were not necessarily correlated with IELTS scores. It became clear to staff in the Master of Business (Property) that while some Thai students had adequate English language skills, others had insufficient language competence to successfully complete their studies at the level expected of them without extensive remedial intervention. In other words, IELTS scores were not a particularly good indicator of performance in a property program taught in English, where objective standards of performance were expected to be met.

It was this type of situation (of international students enrolled in property programs without adequate preparation) that Yu Shi-Ming warned against in the Keynote Address to the *Pacific Rim Real Estate Society 7th Annual Conference* (2001). Yu argued that while universities benefit from increased enrolment of international students, “admission criteria should not be compromised” (2001, p. 86). Although the admission criteria were substantially adhered to in this case, this proved inadequate for the level of performance expected in the degree. The authors did not find rigorous scientific studies providing empirical evidence of a causal relationship between poor English standards and academic performance in Australian courses. There are three possible reasons for this:

- Such a correlation is “received wisdom” in the NESB academic field.
- While data undoubtedly exists in individual universities, university administrators are probably politically constrained from providing potential proof of allegations of soft marking for overseas fee-paying students.
- Such a study would be very difficult to perform in most universities, taking into account such variables as program, course, policy and teaching staff changes.

Having said that, it was noted that such a study is in progress at the University of South Australia. An early overview of the raw data suggests that there is a strong correlation between IELTS (or equivalent) test scores and academic performance in undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Anecdotal evidence from academics involved in teaching postgraduate courses (not just property courses) to NESB students confirms that there is indeed a dilemma. Having admitted students to a postgraduate program, a university is implicitly saying that the students have a reasonable expectation of obtaining their degree if they work diligently. Teaching staff members are therefore under implicit pressure to do two things:

- Provide extra help to NESB students. This can involve a considerable expenditure of time and effort on the part of academics, which is rarely if ever acknowledged by the employing university.
- Make allowances for lack of English language skills in grading written work and oral presentations. The line between making allowances and soft marking is ill defined.

By the end of 2000, driven to some extent by a desire to alleviate the sort of pressures outlined above, Property staff began exploring ways to assist the Thai students with the challenge of quickly improving their language ability, while continuing to fulfill the requirements of the Master of Property degree.

The development of content-based ESL courses in the School of International Business

Although content-based ESL has been advocated by practitioners in the field for over 15 years (Mohan 1986; Brooks 1988; Guyer & Peterson 1988; Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989; Iancu 1993; Cargill 1996; Sagliano & Greenfield 1998, among others), most universities, including the University of South Australia, have been slow in offering such courses for credit. A number of researchers (Spiller 1992; Pantelides 1999) have suggested that one reason for this situation is the traditional university infrastructure which usually houses Language and Academic Skills (LAS) lecturers in separate “student support centers”, away from mainstream academic faculties.

In late 2000, the School of International Business made a commitment to continue an undergraduate, content-based ESL course called “Business Communication Skills for NESB students”, which had been running on a trial basis since 1997. The lecturer was

given a continuing position as part of the School, which then enabled the development of other content-based ESL courses.

Coinciding with staff recognition that the Thammasat University students needed additional language and academic skills was the pilot of another ESL content-based course for MBA students called “Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates”. Although based on the three components of the MBA course “Management Foundations”, rather than Property material, the Thammasat graduates were invited to participate in the course at the beginning of the third MBA term of 2001. This meant that the first semester was undertaken without the benefit of the new course and the second semester with.

Despite the lack of Property content, the five Thai students who undertook the course passed it. Their results in their professional courses were considerably improved on the first semester and better than those who chose not to undertake Integrated Business Communication. This was hardly a statistically valid result, but encouraging nevertheless. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced by the following comments made by students at the end of the course:

After all I have done...I know that I have learnt a lot. Although it's a very short time, I feel that I have improved all of my skills. (Female Thai Master of Property student, email communication 25 September 2001)

I am so thankful to you for helping me to improve my skills in reading, writing and speaking; also for assisting me in the correct way to write reports...(Female Thai Master of Property student, email communication 22 September 2001)

I would like to thank you for your kindness. You always try to understand and encourage the students including me. That makes me

feel happy every time I send an e-mail to you. I can open my mind and write whatever I would like to say. (Male Thai Master of Property student, email communication 20 September 2001).

Teaching evaluations for the term 3 offering to MBA and Property students were very positive. Students rated course content and objectives and teaching methods very highly. Of the study skills that they considered they had developed, students rated presentation and writing skills very highly, followed by reading and listening skills. Students rated highly the integration into the course of the main themes of global perspectives, ethical concerns, communication processes, leadership and group dynamics and creative problem solving.

A point that needs to be emphasised about content-based ESL courses as they have been developed at the University of South Australia, is that they are not a soft option. Students in both the undergraduate course and Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates have found that it is not a case of “sit there and listen and we’ll pass you in the end”. Students can and do fail the courses if they do not reach a satisfactory standard in assessment that involves written and oral presentation, report writing and demonstrated mastery of the particular professional content. If MBA students do not pass Integrated Business Communication, they are not permitted to proceed with the MBA. Students who do succeed have a sense of achievement and a confidence that stands them in good stead in their subsequent courses.

Developing a Property-based ESL course

A key element in developing a course that effectively integrates content with ESL methodology is the collaborative relationship between content specialist and ESL practitioner (Benesch 1988; Guyer & Peterson; Cargill 1996; Pantelides 1999; Sagliano & Greenfield 1998). Both Property and Business Communication staff agreed that a course using material directly from the Masters program, introduced by Property teaching

staff, and with appropriate language and academic skills built into the curriculum, was a high priority for the next intake of Thammasat graduates.

In addition to adhering to established TESOL methodology, such a course responds to Yu's suggestion that "real estate curricula should incorporate a set of general educational requirements as well as electives in other disciplines to give students a broader outlook" (2001, p. 85-6).

Throughout second semester in 2001, key staff worked together to develop the first content-based ESL course for Master of Property NESB students. The course is divided into three modules, including "Research Methods in Business and Management", "Valuation, Marketing and Management of Specialised Real Estate" and "Corporate Asset Management". Introduction of the mathematically based "Portfolio and Fund Management" is also being considered, as NESB students appear as likely to be weak in mathematics as any other group of students. Integrated into these three modules are generic academic skills (including using library databases, note-taking, writing essays, referencing and avoiding plagiarism), along with the particular language related skills required of property professionals and researchers, such as interviewing, collaborative writing, and business, professional and research report writing.

Lecturers involved in each of the professional areas are also involved in module presentation and assessment, so that students are exposed to the different teaching styles of staff whose professional area is not ESL. Although this may appear to be an imposition, the incentive is that staff gain some valuable insights into teaching their material to ESL students, as well as not having to expend as much time and effort in their own courses with students at risk because of language problems. Each module is assessed with a written document and an oral presentation.

Although specifically designed with the Thammasat students in mind, the course, which begins in July 2002, will be open to all NESB Master of Business (Property) students. In fact, it is considered that all NESB students in the Master of Business (Property) will

need to demonstrate an excellent command of general and business English if they choose not to pursue this course. It had been intended to commence the course in January, but for a rather ironic situation with the Thammasat students. In their teaching stints at Thammasat during 2001, University of South Australia staff held meetings with students interested in studying the Masters in South Australia. At these meetings, the importance of English and having a satisfactory IELTS was emphasised. It was recommended that, ideally, students should study English and obtain a strong IELTS between completing their Graduate Diploma at Thammasat and commencing their Masters at Unisa in Semester 2. This advice appeared to be ignored when nearly all students applied to commence the Masters in Semester 1. However, when the 2001 students returned and spoke to the applicants, nearly all decided to defer until Semester 2 while they improved their English. NESB students commencing in Semester 1 will be placed in the MBA version of Integrated Business Communication.

The results and the views of students who have taken Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates in 2002 will be compared with those who had no opportunity in 2000 or a belated opportunity in 2001, to provide some measure of whether the course is adding value.

Giving international students “a head start”

Despite the fact that AUSAID postgraduate students with the minimum 6.00 IELTS level are required to complete a five-week language and study skills course at CALUSA (Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of South Australia), this has never been a compulsory requirement for other NESB students, including the Thammasat graduates. It seemed obvious that here was another way to improve the learning outcomes for the Thai Master of Business (Property) students.

Unfortunately, the CALUSA terms and the University semesters begin at different times in the year. With some negotiation, and flexibility demonstrated by all parties, an intensive EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course has been established, specifically for the NESB students expected in Semester 2, 2002. An important aspect of the EAP

course is the fact that students will arrive in Australia two weeks prior to the start of Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates and six weeks prior to the start of the three remaining second semester Master of Business (Property) courses. This extra time will allow them to arrange accommodation, get over the initial culture shock and generally start to make Adelaide their home. In the past, many NESB students (not necessarily Thai) have literally arrived the day before classes begin, or even later. While some of the Thai students commencing in semester 2 will undertake the EAP, others are contemplating other intensive academic English programs in Australia or Thailand.

Given the importance alluded to earlier of understanding the Western cultural paradigm that gives rise to the way the University of South Australia teaches Property, the staged approach from language and culture, through language and property/business skills to direct property itself would seem to be an approach worth trying. The fact that Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates, being term-based, finishes half-way through the first semester is likely to assist the staged approach. Thammasat students in Term 3/Semester 2 2001 have commented favourably on the ability to concentrate on the assessment in only three courses during the latter part of the semester. This should apply to an even greater degree to students who have come in fresh without a semester of difficulty behind them.

Introduction to the local property “community”

An important part of the professional development of NESB students, who will often be returning to very responsible positions in their countries of origin, is exposure to the local property industry, its industry and professional bodies and its practitioners. This is part of the previously mentioned understanding of the cultural context of our local property markets, which of course we take for granted, but also provides worthwhile contacts and ideas that can be implemented in the country of origin.

NESB students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, often seem to be diffident about making local industry contacts and attending professional workshops, let alone seeking out work experience. Front-loading of the language content and a graduated

approach to the professional studies, with the resultant English skills, should assist students to be more confident about making industry contacts. Regardless of this, the School is starting to work with the local professional bodies, with major international property employers and with government to actively facilitate the process.

Implications for the future

Recognising and working to address the language and academic needs of the Thammasat students has had an on-going effect on the School of International Business. Given the key role in “internationalisation” played by the School, and the Division of Business and Enterprise generally, (the Division is responsible for nearly 60% of the University’s international students (University of South Australia 2001), it is anticipated that the lessons learned from this experience may be extended to other courses in which international students are enrolled. Some of those lessons include:

- Recognition from all stakeholders in the tertiary sector that “internationalisation” involves responsibilities, as well as benefits;
- Acknowledgement from management and faculty that a minimum IELTS score is barely adequate for successful academic study, particularly at the postgraduate level (Pantelides 1999; Wajnryb 2000);
- A willingness to adapt or develop courses to meet the language and academic needs of international students (one useful model being content-based ESL);
- Flexibility in working with other academic staff, faculties and/or institutions in the delivery of innovative (and meaningful) models of delivery; and
- Commitment at all levels to the on going socio-linguistic needs of international students as they negotiate their new learning and living environments.

Conclusion

What began in 1997 as a one-way exchange of expertise from the University of South Australia to Thammasat University has become a genuine example of international exchange. Lecturers from Adelaide continue to travel to Bangkok, with on-going benefits to Thammasat University, while increasing numbers of Thai students make Adelaide their home for the duration of their Masters program.

In addition to their contribution to the cultural richness and diversity of the University community, having these students in our classes has challenged the way we teach, and forced us to recognise the responsibilities inherent in “internationalisation”. Integrating best TESOL practice with core subject content will be a continuing project at the University of South Australia.

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