



## CHALLENGES OF RUNNING A NORTH AMERICAN GRADUATE PROGRAM OFFSHORE

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### Abstract

Running a graduate university program offshore is challenging under the best conditions. Obstacles include cost, cross cultural barriers and misunderstandings, travel, country and organizational politics, a changing external environment, currency fluctuations and time-zone differences. There is also the challenge of creating a physical presence for the program and university in the foreign location and developing and protecting the university brand. Universities that run such programs invest heavily in building and maintaining relationships with partner organizations and relevant stakeholders in order to resolve differences and handle uncertainty. In most cases the success of the program is dependent upon the relationship between partners. This research looks at what happens when changes in the partner organization and geopolitical events lead to a disconnect between partners. It also considers the impact of the resultant disconnect on an in-session student cohort, student representatives and the partner organizations.

**Key Words:** Global, cross-culture, exporting education.

### INTRODUCTION

The initial arrangement between the master's program of the degree granting university and the partnering organization discussed in this paper began in 2001. The degree granting university is a large fully accredited North American institution with a student population of over 22,000. Quotes included in the paper are from the two student representatives of the last cohort to complete the program and the university director responsible for that cohort. The program was jointly run between the degree-granting university, and the partner organization situated in the host country. Teaching responsibilities and administration of the program were a shared responsibility between the university and the partner organization. Although the partner organization was also a degree granting institution, the only degree being offered by the program was that awarded by the North American University. As part of the program, faculty flew to the host country for one to two weeks at a time and delivered one to two courses during their stay. The partner organization arranged for accommodation, transportation, food and occasional touring opportunities for the faculty members while in the host country. Courses were held roughly once every 3 to 4 weeks.



Despite efforts to improve the program, the faculty experience and the communication between the two organizations, there were regular challenges facing the program directors. For example, over the years admission standards at the university were raised, English proficiency expectations were increased, geopolitical tensions in the area where the classes were held flared up occasionally, program support within the degree granting university was inconsistent, resources were stretched and cultural differences led to miscommunication and misunderstandings. Cultural differences resulted in conflicts between the administration in the two main organizations, the two groups of faculty teaching in the program (the university and the partner organization faculty) and between faculty and students.

From the start of the program until the point the program was suspended in September 2013 the program ran roughly one cohort of students each year. These cohorts numbered from 15 to just over 40 students. Each cohort remained in the program for a year and a half to two years. The majority of the credit courses were taught by the degree granting organization with the student tuition being divided between the two partner organizations in a similar ratio as the course division. The program offered a North American degree in an English learning environment. This was seen as an attractive feature to students entering the program since students were able to obtain a degree from an internationally recognized English-language university without leaving their country. The price of the program was more than similar degrees offered in the host country, but competitive internationally. This permitted students to save on the costs of being an international student and also presented the option of working while pursuing their studies. Additionally, the program opened up opportunities to students for further graduate studies in foreign universities.

In the operation of the program there were six key stakeholders: the degree granting university, faculty from this university, the partner organization, the cohort of students, the embassy of the country of the degree granting university and the Ministry of Education in the host country. Running the program smoothly and successfully depended on overlapping goals among these stakeholders and effective communication between them. The halting of the program in 2013 occurred in large part as a result of changes in these key stakeholders and the communication breakdowns that ensued. As communication broke down between the university and the partner organization, students in the last cohort created new lines of communication with the university in order to remedy the challenges they faced and complete their degree.

This paper starts with an examination of the problems that developed between participants and their effects on the operation of the program. We also look at the impact this had on students and consider the emergent lines of communication that developed to deal with these issues. We conclude with a summary of guidelines that can be used to improve future programs.

#### **CHANGING ADMINISTRATION AT THE UNIVERSITY**

Faculty and administration turnover in the university and in the partner organization posed challenges for the program. In the case of both stakeholders, one or sometimes two faculty members were assigned to direct the program, facilitate cohorts and maintain communication between the two institutions. Periodically, these individuals were replaced. In July 2010 a new director was assigned to the program in the university. The director had taught in the program during the previous three years and therefore had some familiarity with the program, the culture and the partner organization. This helped to create consistency and continuity within the program. However, in the case of the partner organization, when the director of the program was replaced, many of the support staff also left. Typically the new director was completely new to the organization. This restructuring led to a time when there was a loss of knowledge about processes. In most cases the transfer from old employees to new ones was done amicably, but not always. This created confusion among faculty and students. Even in an ideal transition, knowledge about process and program history can be lost.

In September of 2010 a new cohort began the program with a three day orientation run by the newly appointed university program director. At that time, there was some tension between the university and the director of the partner organization regarding tuition payment to the university and accommodation of the faculty in the host country. The accommodation issue arose because the director of the partner organization



had a falling out with the manager of the hotel the faculty previously stayed in. This resulted in relocation to a less desirable hotel. After a year and much discussion, the partner organization started the process of relocating accommodation to apartments in a quieter part of the community. The move to the apartments was delayed as the new apartments required appliances, furnishings and internet services before faculty could move out of the hotel.

#### **POOR RELATIONS BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND PARTNER ORGANIZATION**

As a prerequisite to credit courses at the university, students were required to take preparatory courses arranged by the partner organization. The university required that the partner organization would only allow students who possessed all the required documents to be enrolled in the program. Occasionally exceptions would be made and conditional acceptance could be offered to the student. Unfortunately, the partner organization took a relaxed approach to these requirements, and allowed many students without full documentation to enter the program - expecting students to gather these documents while taking preparatory courses. In some cases students were also allowed to join preparatory courses after they had started. This led to confusion among students regarding when to submit documents and the importance of preparatory courses. In addition, students were told the program was less than two years in length, but details of when classes would be held and the payment process were left vague. The webpage for the program posted by the partner organization was typically out of date creating additional confusion however since it was not in English it was difficult for the university to monitor.

Student Rep A: According to the website the prep courses should have been maximum 3 month and the rest of the program was supposed to be finished within 15 month so all together 18 month but after seven or eight months we were still just doing all the prep courses. We were also having problems with the payments being made to (the partner organization)...so students were getting a little bit frustrated and asking questions and (those in the partner organization) were all saying you know what we are working with XXX University, there is a problem, management has changed, we are working on that, don't worry about it. Just do your things, you will finish on time.

Since this student and his cohort were still at the stage of completing preparatory courses, making payments and submitting documents for admission, they were limited to communication with the partner organization. In general, communication between students and the university only began once credit courses commenced. This initial disconnect between the students and the university created miscommunication, which resulted in distrust and uncertainty. In an effort to navigate this confusion, students rallied together and elected representatives to negotiate with the director of the partner organization (Dr. E) on behalf of the cohort.

Student Rep A: ....so we went to (Dr. E), and he started explaining "you guys don't know what the problems are and what is happening. I am dealing with many problems with the Ministry of Education, with (the university) and with students from previous cohorts. Cohort A are harassing me. One of the students from cohort B wanted to beat me up and all sort of stuff. People don't appreciate what I am doing. I am doing my best!"...and we were just listening. And we said if they did that sort of thing we don't agree with that but what our problem is is that everybody is unhappy because you are not communicating with us. We have paid our dues...we are attending the classes...And you haven't delivered your promises yet. ...So after that meeting we went back to our studying but nothing happened.

Dr. E was frustrated with the university because, based on the previous cohort, he and his staff were doing what was required. The director was not fully aware of the changes initiated by the university and the effects these changes had on the program. These policy changes and changes within the administration at the university meant more was required of the director at the partner organization.



Student Rep A: (Dr. E) was being accused of something which I don't think was fair...he sort of put himself in the center of problems but all he could do was simply transfer all these problems and unhappiness of the students back and forth between (the university) and the students.

With the replacement of the old university program director and the changes in university policy, students were now required to submit more complete documents before being admitted. As a result, commencement of each cohort slowed down. The partner organization and the university were waiting on each other to finalize student admission. The university was waiting for all required documents. The partner organization, thinking they had done what was required, were waiting for details about the program to share with the students and arrange the support for the credit courses. As a result the credit courses were not commencing.

A: We raised our concerns about when the credit courses would begin and the schedule again with Dr. E. Dr. E responded "you can talk to the program officer in country XXX and get your answers from them. You are more than welcome to communicate with them". Everybody started doing that explaining the problems saying that "we are speaking to Dr. E and he is saying the problem is from XXX University". We have already paid our dues and now Dr. E is saying students should submit their documents to XXX University and if they don't nothing is going to happen. We answered that "as far as we know if some students are missing some documents XXX University can conditionally accept their applications". XXX University administrator got back to us saying "if you don't submit the documents the application will not be processed. That is the way we do it in county XXX".

The students and the partner organization were not adequately informed of the changes to the program structure, timetable, course order, admission procedures and policies. Additionally, since the university changed procedures and policies from those of the previous cohort without fully briefing the partner organization there was unintentional misinformation being supplied by the partner organization. Apart from e-mailing or calling the university directly, there was no stable source for this information that could be used as reference material for the partner organization or students.

Cultural differences also created difficulties. The culture of the country in which the partner organization was located can be characterized by high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2013). In contrast, the culture of the country in which the university is located is low power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. As a result, the director of the partner organization objected to being questioned by students who were younger and less established. The partner organization also expected important information such as a change in program design to be communicated directly to the director at the partner organization – something which did not occur. Instead Dr. E was hearing of the changes through an administrator working for the university. Furthermore, the university was strict in their application of the new policies and procedures they had adopted (high uncertainty avoidance) which conflicted with the partner organization, where the approach was more flexible (low uncertainty avoidance). When the student's eventually contacted the university directly, they were told unequivocally what the policies were and to expect that their questions, such as what the timetable would be for the courses, would be answered once the information was available. Due to cultural differences the students did not know what to make of this information - wondering if their concerns were once again being ignored. When they consulted with one of the two newly appointed class representatives (required by the university for each cohort) they were told to believe what they were being told by the university.

Student Rep A: I told the students I have been in that country and everything there happens by the book most of the time so if they say so please trust them and listen to what they say be patient and it is going to happen but it is a matter of time. It will happen sooner or later. All we have to do is focus on what we are doing.

As an added difficulty, political unrest in the host country began to present a problem. This added to the wariness of the students in terms of the university's level of commitment to the program and their cohort.

Student Rep A: Some of the students were getting a little bit excited because of what was happening in (the host country) ... The rallying and everything was escalating and we were sensing ... a big conflict inside the country and again inside the country everything was a mess. So everybody was saying what if some revolution or something happens and these people move or something happens to the program. My answer was that we are basically applying with XXX University if anything happens we are XXX's students and they will take care of that. This is not a problem as soon as we all submit the documents and become the XXX University's students.

#### **BREAKDOWN IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE PARTNER ORGANIZATION**

In April 2011 the director of the partner organization was suddenly replaced. The new and old director in the partner organization did not view each other in a favourable light, and this led to very little knowledge being transferred between the two. The new director maintained the old staff for one to two months, but ultimately replaced almost all of them. Those who left were not paid outstanding wages and had to go to court to receive money owed. Since the new director and the majority of the replacement staff were low level English users, this further complicated communications between the university and partner organization. These factors combined to make the operation of the program increasingly difficult.

Student Rep B: One of the people who was not so happy when Dr. E left ... was me, most of the people they said many not so good words behind (his back), but I was thinking that... the problem was not if he wanted to leave or not, it was a sign that there were lots of problems...I was thinking sometimes a person is not that ...good at one job but at least this job is going to be finished by the same person unless a person who is coming in will be stronger and more skillful in the management. I was not sure if the new person coming (in) can handle all the situations. What we saw was our connection to the partner organization was completely cut. I think Dr. E was trying his best but he thought that he is doing the things in the right way...at least his mind was much clearer than the new people when they came.

Under the new management at the partner organization, requests by the university and students were either ignored completely or poorly attended to. Although conversations between the director of the university and the new director of the partner organization did take place, they were mostly superficial and failed to address outstanding critical issues. New faculty members continued to arrive in the host country, but due to the intense work load, jet lag and the cultural differences in the host country, faculty focused on interacting with students and completing courses to the best of their ability instead of dealing with problems related to the operation of the program. Word of a lack of support by the partner organization was only mentioned occasionally to the director of the university program by faculty members upon returning home.

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges facing faculty members travelling to the host country, accommodations provided by the partner organization also ended up creating issues. Once the new director at the partner organization took over, faculty were moved to the apartment which still lacked adequate appliances, furnishings and internet service. Inadvertently the class representatives found out about the faculty accommodation problems.

Student Rep A: ...we started realizing from Dr. L (XXX University faculty member) that nobody was paying attention to the professors' needs. We realized that he was not comfortable... he said the mattress is very hard. Dr. L said he asked staff to add one of those sponge pieces on top because "I cannot sleep on that." We later asked if they (staff of partner organization) bought him what he wanted and he was saying no that is ok, they are busy and when we asked him again he replied not yet but I don't want to complain just for a small mattress. That is ok! So, he didn't get what he wanted. It was very annoying. If you cannot sleep properly it means there is a problem and people should pay attention to that.



The partner organization arranged for food to be placed in a fridge at the apartment, but there was no stove to cook on. The only way to boil water was using a glass coffee pot the director had supplied. The staff in the partner organization would take faculty to a restaurant for lunch and dinner but it was always the same restaurant and not always when the faculty wanted to go. A combo washing machine/dryer was included in the apartment, but it was not installed. Under the previous director, each faculty member was given a monetary allowance to purchase food and hire taxis. The new administration terminated this practice. The taxi option was replaced with a driver that had to be prearranged and was not always available or on time. Due to language barriers it was difficult for faculty to order a taxi even if they had the correct currency to pay a driver.

Student Rep A: The professors finish the class and someone (within the partner organization) takes the professor to a restaurant, feeds the professor and then drops them off at the apartment. And then comes and picks them up in the evening to feed them again and then they go back to the apartment and the (staff in the partner organization) were thinking: "Oh! We are just doing a great job!" I was talking with (Student Rep B) saying this doesn't sound good. These people are getting isolated in here and they have nothing to do and the only good time they have is in the class because they can be with students at least. But then how much time do they need to work on their materials for the next day. More than two hours? And what do they do with the remaining time? We didn't know that there was no internet (at the apartment). So, we decided to take the professor with us to the places we went to.

#### FURTHER COMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDENTS

Following the changes at the partner organization, students were surprised the new director had not visited the class to introduce themselves. Historically, as with the previous director, the students had maintained communication with the director of the partner organization throughout the program. The class representatives decided to take the initiative and introduce themselves to the new director. It was through this undertaking that they realized how disconnected and disinterested the new director was.

Student Rep A: Then we tried to go and meet Dr. F (new director of the partner organization). Just arrange a meeting with him to welcome him. I told (Student Rep B) this is his responsibility, he should be the one coming to our class, and introducing himself. But also what you are suggesting (visiting him) is good. So, how should we do it? (Student Rep B) said ok, I will book an appointment and we will go and meet him. We can also get him something like flowers. I said it is a great idea for sake of the class and the program. She started contacting YYY (the partner organization). Once, twice, three times and she said you know what, I can't get hold of him. He is not there or is always busy. I don't know how many times (Student Rep B) called but she wasn't able to get hold of him. And finally, (Student Rep B) called me and said, you know what Dr. F is saying: "I am busy but I will be travelling to (the community where the classes are held) at 4 o'clock today and if they can come to the airport I can meet with them for about ten or fifteen minutes."

The student representatives recognized the new director had no interest or intention to meet with them. By avoiding and not return the calls of the class representative the message was clear – you and your cohort and not important to me.

Student Rep A: Is he thinking that we have nothing to do but just meet with him or we will be very honoured to meet with him at the airport? I said, you know what, just forget about them. They don't even understand what they are talking about. ...He was thinking that he was very superior. I don't know what goes to people's mind that they think they are the most important people in the world, or at least in their organization. We are not asking for too much. "We are willing to communicate with you trying to welcome you to this organization and share our point of view with you and you don't have time for us." I don't see any reason for communicating with such people.



Relations between students and the new director and staff at the partner organization remained distant and strained. The staff adopted the attitude of indifference that the director displayed. Problems related to arranging class details and holding/proctoring exams became tense and complicated. In one instance it took over three months before a cable for the projector used by university faculty and students for PowerPoint presentations was repaired. No matter how many times repairs were requested and met with agreement nothing was fixed.

#### **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES PERFORM THE ROLE OF PARTNER ORGANIZATION**

Once the student representatives realized that nobody was helping the professors, they took action to rectify the situation. At the same time the director at university XXX was trying to push for change but the distance, time difference and language barrier made the efforts ineffective. The class representatives arranged to meet with a staff member from the partner organization.

Student Rep A: We said Mr. D (staff member of the partner organization) we have a list here. We started by explaining that we are representing our culture. It is very important for the professors coming over here to get good service. It is a credit for you and for the system, for the company, for the country. Please pay attention to this list. He replied, sure, why not. What is it? We explained "The stove is not installed and they cannot cook something for themselves. They cannot even boil some eggs. You have filled the fridge with all these foods for them but they cannot do anything with that. Stove should be installed. Internet, internet is important. They also need an office (in the building with the class). Professors have no privacy....there are empty rooms in there. Just have one of them cleaned up and put a desk and a sign that shows professor's office.

Gradually the student representatives became the voice for the university and faculty because they spoke the language of the host country and were living and studying in the cities where the partner organization was located. This allowed them to meet staff of the partner organization even if they chose not to answer calls. The university was almost completely cut off from communication with the partner organization. Emails sent to the partner by the university needed to first be translated, so communication was often limited to the most critical issues. Although the university was able to find one person in the partner organization that spoke English proficiently, it was a low ranking employee who, in the host country, did not have enough status to champion for change. As a result, when this person attempted to bring the university's concerns to the director of the partner organization the concerns were given low priority or totally ignored.

About a month after the new director at the partner organization took over, the students and the university recognized that the partner was no longer an effective stakeholder. At this point the cohort was only half way through their courses. In an effort to resolve problems and meet the requirements of the program, the student representatives established communication through the internet with the director of the program at the university. Initially it was a social communication but gradually the communications turned into discussions about the challenges the students and the university were confronting. Some of these challenges included the regular issues involved with running this kind of program such as organizing travel to the host country and details about courses and exams. This communication would usually have involved the partner organization with either the students or the university contacting the partner; however, at a certain point, the class representatives recognized the need for them to be more proactive and assume the role of the partner organization.

Student Rep A: That was the point we started asking the professors questions to make sure that everything was ok. At the beginning we were hesitant to ask such questions. It was too much asking, for example, what did you eat for breakfast? Did you have anything to eat? We didn't want to be in a position to receive a reply of "Why are you asking this question?" But with Dr. P (faculty member from the university) we felt more comfortable asking these questions. He was very friendly. One day I asked him if it is ok if you tell me what did you have for your breakfast. He said yes I had a good breakfast. But I asked him if he could tell me what exactly he had for



breakfast...I said did you cook some eggs or something? He said no because I don't have a stove. But I had some milk chocolate. I said are you here standing on your feet for four hours teaching only on a glass of milk chocolate? He said yes, actually I wanted to cook some eggs but I couldn't. I said you should have used the kettle, he said I didn't want to damage the kettle. Poor Dr. P used to go two hours before the class (to the building where the classes were held) sometimes to use the internet to just do his works. He was sitting (in the apartment) and getting bored but not complaining. We started taking the professors to the restaurant. We were distributing the cost across the students but again cost wasn't important. The most important part for us was not to leave them alone.

It was through conversations with the class representatives that the university program director became more aware of the problems faced by the university faculty while working in the host country. During these conversations the director learned that the proctoring of exams, one of the few tasks the partner organization was still entrusted with, was not being managed properly. The person assigned to proctor the exams was arguing with students. The proctor did not read English, so when the exams arrived by email, the attached instructions were not always followed correctly. Students even reported that the proctor would sometimes leave students unattended during exams. If there were any problems with the exam, the proctor would claim that the university had made the mistake and that students should complain to the director of the partner organization so he would know that the university was not fulfilling their obligations.

The partner's building facilities also caused a problem. When the director of the partner organization was replaced, the new director had the location of the main office changed. In the new set-up the room designated for holding exams was too small so students sat too close to each. This created the opportunity for students to see each other's work. Based on this revelation, the director of the university program instructed faculty to use open-book exams to prevent some of the problems caused by students sitting so close.

Student Rep B: ...the interesting part was that (Student Rep A) was trying to be in contact with University XXX to moderate the issues. Sometimes the pressure was so high... We wanted to send good news to University XXX and help them to be encouraged to support us.

With the director of the university program and student representatives in communication, many problems were resolved; however, these stakeholders needed to largely ignore the partner organization and problem solve amongst themselves in order to keep the program operating. The most demanding issue the director of the university program and the students navigated was putting pressure on the partner organization to submit the last payment of student tuition to the university. The partner organization held onto the last payment for over 12 months - ignoring every request by the university to make the required deposit. In the end, the class representatives worked with the students and the director of the university program to put the necessary pressure on the partner to pay the money owed. When the payment was received the relationship with the partner organization was ended.

Director of the University Program: I was very fortunate to work with two such accomplished and effective students as class representatives. If it had not been for them the whole situation would have been on my shoulders and likely next to impossible. I needed the ears and eyes on the ground to be informed. The two class representatives were better than the partner organization in providing meaningful dialogue and generating ideas to solve problems. I normally would not want to put such pressure and demands on class representatives but we had no choice. We were all in the same boat so we knew we had to work together. We also concluded we were not going to let the partner organization destroy the program and the cohort so we had a very powerful goal and vision (that of completing the program for the cohort) to give us the energy to do what needed to be done.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The program and the partnership operated smoothly for almost nine years before the leadership problems arose. The effective operation of the program up until this point created some complacency in the university administration. Essentially the belief was that the culture and limitations of the host country (due to infrastructure problems) meant that operations sometimes did not go as planned, but things would always work out. In retrospect it was not inconceivable that an unqualified and unhelpful director might take the helm of the partner organization at some point. Although this event may not have been easily predicted, there are plans that could have been set beforehand that would have better protected the university. As such there are a number of recommendations that arise from this program that can be used to help make other offshore graduate programs run more smoothly:

1. All policies and procedures related to the program should be documented and easily accessible by all stakeholders. Also, given that leadership changes can result on both sides of the partnership, it is essential that all participants can turn to a common, up-to-date source when dealing with program procedures. The contract between partners should explain responsibilities of the partners and provide a program history. It should serve as an explanation of how the program is run, responsibilities, costs, expectations and provide a history of significant events in the program so the knowledge is not lost. Policies and procedures should be part of the contract between partner organizations. This way all participants have added motivation to follow the policies and procedures.
2. Provide a list of expectations and responsibilities for students. Some of the problems both directors faced were related to managing student behaviours. Students from earlier cohorts were able to bend the rules and threaten the director of the partner organization if they did not get their way. This created problems for the partner organization and subsequent cohorts. This is especially challenging when running a program overseas as students in the host country may not feel the partner organization is the true representative of the program.
3. Have students pay their tuition directly to the degree granting university. The partner organization was responsible for offering the preparatory courses, gathering application documents and student tuition. This was agreed to in order to enhance the authority of the partner organization over the students. Unfortunately, this arrangement places the university at risk in terms of receiving tuition payments.
4. Establish communication between the director of the university program and the students. This can be facilitated by electing class representatives for each cohort. Communication with the students can be invaluable in resolving problems and understanding what is happening in the program. It also provides a line of communication in the event there are problems with the program or partner organization.

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