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Students as a Teaching Resource in Preparing Educational Leaders: An International Masters Programme

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Abstract

The Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University has offered a Masters Program in Educational Leadership and Policy (Comparative Education) for the last four years and it attracts students from around the world, with substantial support in terms of scholarships, from the Chinese government. Beijing Normal University introduced a PhD programme in the same discipline in 2013.

The programme is intended to train talented individuals from all over the world, and to provide them with theoretical understanding and skills that will prepare them to take positions of leadership. The programme benefits from the high calibre of students that it attracts, and a multi-national multi-cultural student body is an important educational resource.

The authors have worked in the programme, with other colleagues, since its inception, and describe some of the unique features of the programme, as well as some of the challenges.

Introduction

In the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* issued by Communist Party of China Central Committee and State Council of the People's Republic of China in 2010, it is clearly stated that:

More international students shall be admitted for studies in China. Chinese government scholarships shall be increased, with financial assistance offered mainly to students from other developing countries, and the composition of students coming to this country for studies shall be optimized. Foundation courses shall be given to international students before they start college education in China; more disciplines shall be taught in foreign languages in Chinese colleges; and education quality for those studying in China shall be improved. (Communist Party of China 2010, 35)

In response to the call, Beijing Normal University (BNU) actively encourages its academic institutions to establish English-taught degree programmes. This paper describes the development of the Masters Programme in Educational Leadership and Policy (Comparative Education). The location of the programme in the Institute of International and Comparative Education, and the inclusion of comparative education as a core component of the programme, is a key element in its design, but before focusing on that, some background information will help to give the setting for the programme.

BNU was founded in 1902 and is a leader not only in Chinese education but also on the world stage. BNU places great emphasis on exchange and cooperation with educational institutions nationally and internationally and is building a first-class reputation for scholarship, research and training. (QS 2016) The Institute of International and Comparative Education, founded in 1962, is the oldest and most influential institute for the study of comparative education in China, and is the only nationally recognized centre for comparative education. The Institute has a strong profile of national and international research and is staffed by senior faculty members.

The International Masters Program in Educational Leadership and Policy (Comparative Education) is a unique programme, which was developed by the Institute of International and Comparative Education at BNU with support from the Institute of International Education at Stockholm University. The programme has generous financial support from the Chinese Government and is designed to enhance educational and cultural exchange between China and other countries, as well as to train talented individuals who can contribute to leadership and policy-making worldwide.

The programme includes core courses on comparative education, leadership and management, educational policy, educational planning, and research methods, which are supplemented by elective courses on education and national development, education and rural development and Chinese language. All students must complete a course on Chinese history and culture which is designed to help them adapt to their new environment which will be their home for the two years of the programme. The programme focuses on a series of contemporary educational topics that are relevant to all countries, especially developing nations, including promoting educational equality, high quality education, education for sustainable development and information and communication technologies in education. All students prepare a masters dissertation on the basis of personal research carried out on a topic of personal interest and relevance.

Because the programme enjoys a high level of support from the Chinese Government, providing a good proportion of the students with scholarships that cover their fees and living expenses, the programme is able to attract and recruit students of a very high calibre from around the world. The programme aims to develop in these talented individuals a deep understanding of educational theories and help them acquire a wide knowledge of fundamental trends in

educational reform and development worldwide, coupled with an inquiring and open-minded approach to educational issues and the ability to cope in cross-cultural settings.

The programme recruits approximately 25 students each year, and the mixture of classmates from around the world, never more than three from a single country, provides an important context for the learning about leadership in international settings. The programme is taught in English by a mixture of Chinese scholars who have extensive experience studying and living abroad and native speakers of English who have been recruited to teach in the programme on the basis of their expertise in comparative education.

Although students have been attracted to the programme from at least five continents, including a number of industrialised countries, the majority of students have come from South-East Asia and Africa. In fact there has been a slight shift over the four years during which the programme has operated, with recruitment from South-East Asia predominating in the early years with a gradual shift toward greater recruitment from Africa, especially east Africa. Although the programme is taught in English, and there is no formal requirement for the students to learn Chinese, it has become apparent that speaking Chinese is a valuable asset for living in Beijing, particularly when conducting research in educational settings in Beijing. This may have helped to skew recruitment in recent years towards east Africa, where the Confucius Institutes have been very active, and from which students have come who have a prior experience of Chinese culture, and sometimes Chinese language.

Comparative Education in International Leadership

Torrance and Humes (2015) note that the discourse about leadership has become increasingly important in the field of education, to the extent that leadership has become one of the central themes of teaching. Indeed, the boundary has become so blurred that it has been suggested that teaching is synonymous with leadership, with teachers coaxing their students to learn, and in the process developing the transferrable skills of leadership that are applicable in all areas of institutional leadership (Torrance and Humes 2015, 799)

While there are parallels between leadership and teaching, it stretches the point too far to suggest that they are actually the same, and there are also differences between the two activities. One of the dangers of over-emphasis on the similarity is that in-service training for leadership may be neglected when teachers move from the classroom into positions of organisational leadership. It has, however, been noted that teachers who are promoted to leadership roles, such as appointment as principals of schools, which necessarily moves them away from the classroom, are often frustrated by the fact that the activities they value as professional teachers, and which their success in led to their promotion, actually get in the way of the teaching that they love.

At a basic level there is a sense that leadership is needed at all levels in educational organisations, and classroom teachers must "lead" the pupils in their classrooms, but that is not to be confused with the kind of leadership that is needed at other

levels in educational settings. Whether in the principal's office or in government offices, educational leaders need to have a more formal understanding of how organisations function, how policy is developed and how institutional culture can be shaped.

In that context, we take seriously the warning given by Harber and Davies (2003) that most of the models of leadership that are used in education have been transferred unthinkingly from business settings and / or from industrialised countries in ways that are not always appropriate. It is at that point that the comparative element of leadership programmes is most relevant. Dimmock and Walker (2003) make the case that, although leadership programmes and studies of leadership often take culture into account, in the sense that they engage with organisational culture, they usually ignore the broader culture within which the educational organisation exists. To overcome that shortcoming, Dimmock and Walker propose a framework for a comparative and international branch of leadership studies which can overcome the ethnocentric theory which, according to them, abounds.

Dimmock and Walker (2003) address four elements of school management (curriculum, leadership and management, organisational structures, and teaching and learning) in the context of the culture(s) within which the school system operates. The comparative element of Dimmock and Walker's argument is that comparative education can take such an understanding beyond the realm of understanding the culture of the institution, to embrace regional, or system-wide, culture, and national culture.

Of course, every student who wishes to be successful must engage with curriculum, institutional management structures, organisational norms and teaching and learning methods. In addition, every institution operates within a national and regional culture, although familiarity may render this invisible to local students while presenting it as an obstacle faced by overseas students, which they often grapple with without adequate support.

In the special case of the International Masters Program in Educational Leadership and Policy the challenge is to make the implicit structures of the course explicit, so that the students can learn, not in spite of their prejudices and taken-for-granted assumptions, but through them. In one exercise, one of the authors of this paper asked students in the programme to reflect on the leadership qualities that are admired in their country by thinking about the leaders who were held up as examples of good practice. A student from Mongolia said that the model of good leadership which was promoted in her country was Genghis Khan – a choice most of the other students found difficult to understand, primed as they were to think of Genghis Khan as a destroyer and pillager.

However, the story that she told of the advice that Khan's mother gave to the three brothers, that they were stronger when they worked as a team than when they worked individually, was one that leadership and management courses might present anywhere in the world.

The details of the story, that Khan's mother took three arrow shafts and showed that although they could be broken easily if taken one at a time, they were very difficult to break when the three were taken together, is not, we think, unique to Mongolia. One could easily imagine a similar lesson being illustrated with reference to tearing a London telephone directory in half, and how much easier it is to tear a single page than to tear many. And the football (soccer) team in Hiroshima is called Sanfreccce (a compound word that brings together the Japanese word for three and the Italian word for arrows) and rejoices in the motto "We Fight Together" (Sanfreccce 2016), suggesting again that the story is not unique to Mongolia.

Because we have such a wonderful resource, in the form of very capable students from a great variety of backgrounds, there are ample opportunities for examining not only what different cultures have in common, but how they frequently have diametrically opposing assumptions at the same time. At an intellectual level this is at the core of comparative education, which is why comparative education is central to the programme, but at the experiential level it is important to capture these experiences in the classroom and move them into the centre, rather than leaving them as frustrations as the students "adjust" to their host culture and the cultures of their fellow students.

Curriculum

The curriculum, as a selection from the culture, reflects the values and concerns of the country and its culture. Holmes (1965) identified at least four curriculum models that reflected different values and criteria in the selection of the curriculum, related to different national traditions. These were the essentialist model, the encyclopaedic model, the pragmatic model and the polytechnical model of England, France, the USA and Soviet Union respectively.

There is a difficult question here of how students will engage with different models of the curriculum. The programme employs teachers from China, USA, UK, and Canada, in addition to calling upon the services of visiting professors from many parts of the world. And the students come from diverse cultures and backgrounds. As postgraduate students, they have between them experienced many different educational systems and traditions (normally, but not always, one each). While some come to the masters programme directly after their undergraduate studies, the majority have experience working in educational establishments, in teaching or researching. Insofar as the curriculum addresses issues of leadership, management and policy directly, the traditions of the USA and Europe are quite distinct, so a British teacher, using an American textbook as a resource with students from around the world, already provides a hybrid model that could be confusing.

But the point of comparative education is to raise these questions that would normally be unexpressed, into the foreground of analysis so that differences can be addressed directly. That means that simultaneously drawing on several traditions can be extremely helpful in developing comparative

perspectives, at the same time as it may render the selection of content for specific courses extremely difficult.

Similar remarks might be made about the course introducing Chinese culture. On the one hand, the purpose of the course is to provide an understanding of the culture, in order to help the students manage their experience. On the other hand, the comparative goal of the programme, in the broader scheme of things, is to help the students critique, not only Chinese culture and their own culture, but to provide them with an international setting which is not exclusively tied to any specific culture.

These contradictory demands are not merely limited to the classroom, where they might be isolated and “handled”, but pervade the whole experience of being part of an international programme in Beijing Normal University.

Organisational Structure

Where does one begin when describing organisational structures? It is hard for a European to imagine describing political structures without recourse to the classification of left-wing and right-wing. Although that terminology and classification was borrowed from the seating arrangements in the various legislative bodies that followed the French Revolution, left-wing and right-wing have in time collected overtones of specific political policies, with the left wing leaning toward economic planning, centralist government and protective international tariffs, while the right wing leans toward free trade, decentralisation and globalised markets.

But those classifications lose some of their meaning when a single political party has been in power in a country for a long time, and over that period has adopted policies which have covered the whole range from left to right, as might be the case for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico. In these circumstances, those normal pointers of political difference might mean less than an assessment as to whether the individual politician seems trustworthy.

In China, too, where the Communist Party promotes a free market economy, people may find it necessary to tear up their normal institutional maps and rethink the connections between the personal characteristics of leaders and their institutional positions. In the film, *State of Play*, Ben Affleck (as Stephen Collins) addresses Russell Crowe (as Cal McAffrey): “Am I talking to my college friend, or to a newspaper reporter?”. That is sometimes a hard line to draw, as the film makes clear, but in China it may be still harder. The line between the institutional and the personal can be very perplexing, especially in a culture where *guanxi* (system of social networks and influential relationships) is an important way of structuring interpersonal relationships.

The sum total of these considerations is that it will frequently be difficult for a newcomer to China to understand where and how decisions are made within an organisation, and therefore where and how action can be taken to produce desirable change. And this difficulty may go well beyond the mere issue of language, although difficulties in language will certainly contribute.

Again, this is fertile ground for developing a detachment from one’s home culture, and therefore developing an

international perspective or what might be described as a comparative sensitivity. But being an international student (not to say an international teacher) involves the engagement of the affective as well as the cognitive, and students, some of whom may be far from home for the first time in their lives, have to live through the experience as well as learn about it.

This is by no means a simple challenge, whatever the potential benefits of the experience.

Leadership and Management

One of the paradoxes of the programme is that leadership and management are among the areas of instruction in which the students need least help. Just as, around the world, migrant communities are among the most dynamic sectors of their host communities, so these students have already made the most important commitment that ensures that they will be future leaders and managers in whatever sphere they choose to operate in. They have committed to study for at least two years, often with only limited opportunities to communicate or visit loved ones who have been left behind. Add to that the strict selection processes for the programme, and one can be sure that, whatever else this course may do, it will certainly develop future leaders for international contexts.

But that does not mean that they have forgotten where they come from. At every turn the students in the programme are ambassadors for their home countries. They want to tell the world, and certainly their fellow students, about their home country and their home culture. And they will be upset if they think that a teacher has in any way belittled their culture, however inadvertently.

Brian Holmes (1965) used to tell the story of a time when he was a young lecturer and had been delivering a lecture on the educational system in Belgium. After the lecture had been going for some time, one of his students interrupted him and said, “I cannot let you go on. I am from Belgium, and you have got it completely wrong.” We are not sure how often that, or something similar, happens in this programme, but with an assembled student body that embraces so many countries and continents, the risk is always present.

One of the most important shifts in recent times in universities has been a move away from seeing university teachers as the fount of all knowledge, and efforts have been made to engage students as co-workers in knowledge generation. In that old cliché, the university professor has moved from being a “sage on the stage” to being a “guide on the side.” And that is a wise move when the professor might be ambushed at any moment by an insight from a student who has a completely different perspective on things, or simply knows more.

That does not mean that the exercise of leadership by students is without problems. Finding opportunities and platforms where they can exercise leadership can be difficult. The framework for managing the activities of international students who have been attracted by the Chinese Government’s promotion of international education are relatively new. There are no sound regulations for administering the activities for those international students, although for Chinese students there are. Domestic students

have the support of, for example, the Office for Student Work, the Students' Union and other student communities. For international students there are none. To meet the needs of international students, they have to create informal mechanisms for themselves. The students in the programme have, from time to time, organised cultural events to share the cuisine and culture of one or more of their home countries, or have taken advantage of visiting scholars to arrange an informal seminar, but their organisation has always been relatively informal.

Their leadership in managing this informal network of students in the programme has nevertheless been very impressive. Having a meal with some of the students drawn from more than one cohort of students in the programme, or being taking to task by a second year student for introducing an exercise that sounded interesting with the first year students, leaves one in no doubt that the bush telegraph is working efficiently, and that the students in the programme are developing very effective networks.

Teaching and Learning

As already noted, there has generally been a shift in higher education around the world toward the more active engagement of students as learners. When the students themselves are such a positive resource, this makes even more sense. However, this is not as easy as it sounds, or may be made to appear, in the literature. Teachers, all teachers, have a tendency to hold on to traditional models of education, and we are no exceptions. If a student asks a question, we have, like other teachers, a tendency to think that we should be able to answer it.

But in addition to these universal influences of conservatism on teachers, there are specific elements in the Chinese culture that encourage the use of traditional methods. Chinese students rely very heavily on rote learning. Before classes start at eight o'clock in the morning, students gather, alone or in small groups, in the courtyards across the university, to recite their notes from the previous lesson in preparation for the lessons to come.

This reliance on memory is cultural, but understandable. Given the prodigious feats of memory that are required to read and speak Chinese, students can hardly be blamed if they seek advancement by capitalising on those skills that they have been cultivating since their early years.

But this one traditional attitude spills over into other areas of teaching and learning. Inside each of the classrooms in the teaching buildings is a laminated notice which lists the Six Dos and Six Don'ts – the rules of conduct in the classroom. These rules cover the normal courtesies observed in educational institutions, such as not being absent or arriving late, and not making a noise during class. But they include the rule that one should not use a computer, a learning support that most of the international students would find it difficult to manage without. By the end of any student centred session, most of the rules have been broken. The formal arrangement of the furniture has been disrupted, and the sense of rigid order in the classroom has been broken down.

This is important if the method of teaching and learning is to match the curriculum content and other aspects of the programme. For example, in the curriculum the students learn about McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Theory Y. The former presents people as lazy and shiftless and in need of strict supervision, while the latter presents people as strongly self-motivated and keen to work, if only supervisors would get out of their way. The students learn, as most people do, that they prefer to work in conditions that are managed in accordance with Theory Y.

It would be incongruent to manage the teaching and learning in accordance with Theory X at the same time as trying to impress the students with the benefits of using Theory Y in leading educational organisations. Actually, of course, most teachers are deeply suspicious of their students' motivation, and suspect that if students are allowed the freedom to manage their own time in the classroom they will spend their time passing messages to their friends, or the modern-day equivalent, texting them. That is to say, teachers like to be in control, and are inherently suspicious of the new social media. This attitude is reflected in the fact that one of the Six Don'ts is "Don't use a mobile phone".

This question of how mobile technology should be integrated into the classroom is a vexatious one for many teachers. Our experience has been, however, that very often students will use their mobile devices to seek out supplementary material, or to follow up on suggestions. Such input can broaden the range of material available to everyone in the class, and can further enrich the learning experience.

This example illustrates that the students can benefit from the more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, and that consequently it makes sense to provide the students considerable latitude in pursuing their own interests. An international classroom, almost by definition, is one in which the majority of people present are working in their second or third language. Even with a very good command of English, long formal classes based on lectures can be extremely taxing for students. Coping with new material in a language which requires cognitive effort can be very challenging. The difficulties can be minimised, however, by the simple expedient of allowing time – time for reflecting on the teaching materials, time for talking over new ideas to make sure they are well understood, and time for reviewing notes and consolidating learning.

Of course, notes can only be reviewed if there are notes to review, and so the students will adopt a range of cooperative strategies to make sure they have a second opportunity to cover material. Those strategies cover a range of measures from taping lectures and taking photos of slideshows (there are those mobile phones again), to asking for presentations and videos that have been used in class and sharing them around the group. In short, the students work very hard to learn everything they can, and this is best managed in a relaxed atmosphere where students can control their own time. As noted above, this may run counter to the natural instincts of teachers, who have been taught that they need to be in control, and that students will be lazy if they are given the chance.

Working with international students requires a change of approach, and we need to recognise that, even with scholarships and financial support, these students are making a considerable sacrifice to be on the programme. They are away from home and loved ones and living in challenging surroundings, often for the whole two years without a visit home. And the comment that comes up most often in casual conversation is how they miss home cooking. These are students who are highly motivated.

Conclusion

It is no surprise the programme helps develop leaders for international and globalised contexts. Given the selection of students that we have in our programme, and the stimulating backdrop that Beijing provides for a group of very able and very diverse people, we would be hard put not to develop world-class leaders. The programme simply provides experiences that allow them to attain their potential, some of which happen in the classroom.

Because the programme is still relatively young, it is not possible to point to successful graduates at the end of their glittering careers. But graduates have already progressed to doctoral studies at a number of prestigious institutions, in China and around the world. Others have returned to their home countries where they have taken up positions in national research centres or government think-tanks, or in other levels of educational administration. We do not attribute every one of these successes to their participation in this programme; many of our students have earned national recognition for their scholarship and other activities before they come to Beijing. But we are confident that these short-term successes will be followed by other, longer-term successes, and that our graduates will be influential in international education in the future.

The central challenge for the programme is to ensure that the classroom experiences complement the other aspects of the student experience in such a way that the students are reflective, conscious and positive about their learning experiences.



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