Business schools like to stress awareness of other cultures to their students. As they increasingly offer executive education programmes taught abroad by their own faculty they also need to practise it themselves says Mark Thomas
For many years an international executive education experience was the privilege of a few senior company executives who were flown off to different parts of the world to complete a course at a top business school.

The past few years have seen a certain democratisation of this process. Cheaper and easier travel combined with a greater awareness by many companies of what they require from executive education providers has increased demand for executive delivery across borders. Rather than flying their executives out, companies are now choosing to fly the professors in. Business schools, which have found their local markets reaching a certain level of maturity, have been happy to respond.

Despite the current financial downturn, the need for training and management development across borders will almost certainly continue. In fact, this model may even increase as companies decide that they can train 30 managers locally for the same cost as sending three or four abroad.

The model may therefore have a great future, particularly with the huge increase in the demand for higher education in Asian and Middle East countries. According to Merrill Lynch, a financial management and advisory group, China alone will have 240 million students in higher education by 2020. That’s half the current population of the European Union studying at any given time.

This will have two effects: an increase in demand for executive education as older employees try to keep pace with a newer, more educated generation and a greater demand for outside teaching to foster new ideas. Running such programmes successfully does not mean, however, just putting a group of trusted professors on a plane and asking them to get on with it.

Academics Henry Mintzberg and Jonathan Gosling in their 2002 book Management Education as if Both Matter tell us that the hardest lesson for business school professors to learn is that experienced managers have at least as much to learn from each other as they do from their teachers. This is even more true in a programme delivered cross-culturally.

Education must therefore rely on a preset design. If a business school is effectively to deliver an international executive education programme it will need to rethink many of its standard practices to ensure that it makes a full impact.

This means putting the customer’s needs first and making the programme learner-centred in order to gain maximum efficiency. Simple, right? It is, if you know exactly what those concepts mean to your potential partner.

The tendency to stick to preset formulas can be traced to the very origins of the modern day business school.
The first Western business schools were set up about 100 years ago when ideas such as “natural superiority” prevailed. Since Western models were considered to be universally valid regardless of the cultures they were in, a “one best way approach” was the next logical step.

To some extent this has been reinforced by the very success of these business schools. When we see students from the four corners of the world strolling down our corridors every day it is difficult not to feel a sense of satisfaction and pride. These people have invested considerable time and money to come and learn all the skills and knowledge that we have to offer.

Students that have made the effort to go and study in a foreign country are far more prepared to make a greater paradigmatic shift of their own norms and values. We all know that we have to adapt when we go to a foreign country and the vast majority of us are prepared to make the effort. But executives walking out of their office and straight into a class in their own country will not be in the same state of mind. Of course they have requested outside training because they are looking for a different awareness of certain aspects of business. However, what these executives also require are skills that have immediate applicability.

We know through Russian developmental psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotsky’s work on “zones of proximal development” that we go through learning stages that to some extent must be dealt with on a step-by-step basis.

Much of standard Western orthodoxy in the classroom has to be thoroughly explained in an on-going process. Things that are taken for granted in Western classrooms such as the role of case studies, group work and group grades, respect for deadlines and a strict definition of what constitutes plagiarism are difficult concepts to grasp for some cultures.

This is particularly true when it is the professor, not the student, who is flying to a foreign country. What is an Iranian manager, sitting in a classroom in Tehran, to think of a French or British professor, fresh off the plane, telling him to adapt to Western methods? It simply isn’t going to work.

If we wish to make such programmes successful, we really need to think carefully about how we intend to deliver them (the success of a programme will begin during the negotiation phase long before classes begin) but also to be sensitive to the dynamics and realities of what the future participants will undergo. During this stage it is vital to have a clear academic approach on programme and content delivery. Of course, not everything can or should be put up for negotiation. Many elements of the programme must be considered as non-variables. These all relate to the fundamental values and standards of the programme.

The initial competence level of the participants is, for example, a non-variable as is language ability.

This sounds simple. But experience shows that the executive education provider will undergo a lot of pressure to move standards and allow weaker members to join the group. But move them at your peril because another non-variable—expected final outcomes—will be directly related to this. If the participants are weak coming in, not only will they struggle but they will almost certainly hold up the rest of the group.

However, if these elements cannot be negotiated, certain parts of course delivery will almost certainly need to be.

We generally accept today that formal training will only count for a small percentage of management development. The rest comes from on-the-job learning. Given this, executive education providers should be fully aware of the prevailing “local received wisdom”. But are we? Do we assume a manager in Moscow will have the same frame of reference as one in Shanghai?

How many flying faculty are actually given intercultural management training before they go off to teach in far flung parts of the world? Probably very few.

Perhaps then, the intercultural development process should be seen as a two-way process. If our teaching is to be truly international then we need a deep understanding of how management is represented at a local level.

We need to be very careful about the
Why business schools need their own cross cultural awareness by Mark Thomas

EFMD Global Focus | Volume 03 | Issue 02 2009

In the local context? We cannot possibly

when dealing with HRM or cross-culture

experiences? Probably very little.

how much do we know about the

when linked to lived experiences. But

accept that learning is more powerful

research within the company. We generally

The real solution is to actively engage in

issues faced.

Such examples show that success can be

established through constant explanation

and guidance and most of all through

adapting certain teaching styles to the

frames of reference of local managers.

It is about being pedagogical about our

own pedagogy.

Indeed, I would suggest that we could

go even further.

The real solution is to actively engage in

research within the company. We generally

accept that learning is more powerful

when linked to lived experiences. But

how much do we know about the

experiences? Probably very little.

When dealing with HRM or cross-culture

issues, what power dynamics are in play

in the local context? We cannot possibly

know this without spending time

analysing the dynamics of interactions

within the firm. Obviously this includes

a cost to the business school but since

consultants have no problem in charging

a daily rate for services provided, why

should an academic institution? After all,

the client is interested in the overall results.

A recent Fortune 500 survey found that

85% of companies estimated that there

was a lack of truly global managers.

By making an in-depth analysis of

how managers learn and transferring

such techniques to their own courses,

business schools themselves can further

the development of such global leaders.

As we have seen, demographic changes

in certain countries will almost certainly

lead to an increase in the number of

programmes delivered in this way.

The current financial crisis may even

accelerate the process as firms seek better

value for money and innovation through

learning as a means to increase revenues.

Given that growth in the education

market will come primarily from Asia in

the coming years, getting this approach

right is of vital importance to business

schools that wish to stay relevant.

If done properly, the impact can be very

great indeed. Many participants on these

programmes report not just learning new

skills but also the development of a greater

sense of community within the workplace

through having a shared learning

experience.

By engaging with a more diverse approach
to pedagogical delivery, business schools
can also be instrumental in the

advancement of companies across the
globe. gf

“ ”

Executive education providers should be fully
aware of the prevailing “local received wisdom”.
But are we? Do we assume a manager in Moscow will have the
same frame of reference as one in Shanghai?

Key Points to Consider

1. Adaptation to new methods may be much harder for participants learning in their own country

2. Define clearly the fundamental values, entry requirements and expected learning outcomes of the programme

3. Give some form of intercultural training to your own staff, including professors, and encourage them to adapt their styles of working

4. Establish a dialogue (“a real one”) about how successful techniques may be when adopted in a company

5. Be prepared to negotiate on the approach to learning

6. Engage in an in-depth analysis of how companies operate in their chosen market

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Thomas is Associate Dean for International Affairs at Grenoble Ecole de Management, France. He is currently completing a PhD at Lancaster University Management School, UK, on the transfer of learning in executive education programmes.

The author would like to thank Steve Ludlow, Head of Business Development at the Said Business School, University of Oxford, UK, for his helpful comments on an early draft of this article.