

New Ideas in Higher Education Emerging from the United Kingdom: Research Notes on Global TIES at the University of Warwick, and the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons at the University of Manchester

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1 Introduction

Universities in the United Kingdom face many of the same challenges which confront Japanese universities at the start of the 21st century. These challenges include, but are not limited to, economic, social, political, and technological pressures. Budgets are tighter, students are in turn either more demanding or less motivated, governments are more interfering, and technology ever-changing.

Under these circumstances, universities worldwide must adopt a maxim from the business world and “innovate or die”. These research notes present case-study outlines of two examples of new ideas in higher education from British universities which provide indications for methods by which universities can address some of the challenges mentioned above. First, these notes will describe the Global TIES (Training in Intercultural Effectiveness) course written and taught by teachers at the University of Warwick, and then discuss the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons, a new learning facility for the use of students at the University of Manchester.

2 Global TIES

Global TIES is an online course for fostering global career skills which was developed in partnership between the British Council and the University of Warwick.

2.1 Background

In 2010, the British Council in Japan asked British universities to submit proposals for a course which would give Japanese university students a taste of taking classes at a university in the United Kingdom. The role of the British Council is ‘to build links between UK people and institutions and those around the world, helping to create trust and lay foundations for prosperity and security around the world’ (British Council, 2015) and one of its main functions in Japan is to promote the United Kingdom as a desirable destination for studying overseas. The design brief for the proposed course was that it should be a useful preparatory step in advance of studying abroad, for students who were not yet ready to commit themselves to actually undertaking a course of overseas study, but which would inspire them to study in the United Kingdom. Global TIES was designed to fit this design brief and is a short-term course which uses interactive learning materials including video lectures conducted live and in English (UK Trade and Investment. English Language UK Education & Training Capability, 2014, p. 5). These elements of the course enable Japanese students to experience the atmosphere of university classes in the United Kingdom without the necessity of leaving their university classroom in Japan.

The British Council in Japan proposed that the theme of the course should be global career skills in connection with the Japanese government and Japanese industry’s current focus on developing young people to be global human

resources (British Council Japan. Case study: Global TIES, 2015). Once the theme of the course was decided, British institutions of higher education joined a formal bidding process to be awarded the contract for developing the course. The course proposal made by the University of Warwick was chosen because of the university's proficiency in distance learning programs in addition to the university already having produced a similar course for the Chinese market called Global People. The Global People course was one of the outcomes of the eChina-UK Programme. Although the titles of Global People and Global TIES are quite similar, the content of the two courses is substantially different. Global People and the eChina-UK Programme were primarily concerned with academic cooperation and output (Reid, 2009, p. 3) whereas Global TIES is an online training course in the intercultural field with a focus on developing leadership skills.

2.2 *Course Outline*

Initially, the University of Warwick proposed to the British Council that the Global TIES course would comprise five modules. However, it was determined after consultation that not all of the proposed modules would be practical; for example, a stand-alone module about job interviews might not be feasible. It was also decided that it would be more satisfactory to cover a smaller number of modules in greater depth than to cover the initially-proposed five models more thinly. The initial five modules were therefore consolidated into three modules focusing on leadership which could be covered in more detail.

The course was named Global TIES with the word TIES standing for Training in Intercultural Effectiveness, and the three modules taught through the course are 'Understanding Culture for Work', 'Working in Global Teams', and 'Becoming a Global Leader' (University of Warwick. Global PAD, 2015). The thorough completion of each module requires approximately five hours of class participation and self-study time. The aim of all of the modules is to increase students' ability to be effective at working in the globalized world of today. E-learning materials, including video presentations, audio recordings and talks, are used in conjunction with the interactive seminars which are taught by staff from the University of Warwick. The course was wholly prepared by the University of Warwick and the examples of intercultural difficulties and misunderstandings are either based on the personal experiences of the authors or were collected by the authors during research interviews. This means that the course materials are entirely authentic.

Upon completion of the Global TIES course, participants are presented with a certificate as evidence of having fulfilled the requirements of the course.

A major difference compared with Japanese university classes is that the Global TIES course involves students debating issues much more during class time, and the teachers from the United Kingdom also give a more significant amount of feedback during class time than Japanese teachers would normally. In addition to participating in the video seminars, the Japanese students participate in an online forum for the duration of the class. Although the British Council only promotes the course in Japan, the intercultural case studies used in the course would be applicable to any country.

2.3 *Course Development*

The development of the Global TIES course was the responsibility of Professor Helen Spencer-Oatey, Dr. Reissner-Roubicek, and Mr. Andrew Davidson, all from the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. One particular challenge in the development of the course was making appropriate choices for the modules and the content of them. It was judged to be important that the modules had a rich content but were also concise; the content had to be covered in a relatively short period of time, but at the same time it could not be trivial. Eventually, the following three modules were chosen, and the content of each module is shown below (British Council Japan. Global TIES: Training in Intercultural Effectiveness, 2015).

1. Understanding Culture at Work

- Observing the influence of culture in the workplace and acquiring the ability to interpret the influence of culture.
 - Heightening sensitivity to the influence of culture in the workplace.
 - Understanding the qualities of culture and its importance in the workplace.
2. Becoming a Global Leader
- Understanding how culture influences your own and other people's concept of leadership.
 - Acquiring the ability to analyze the influence of culture on leadership.
 - Understanding the qualities of a leader capable of being active on the global stage, and the issues surrounding global leadership.
3. Working in Global Teams
- Acquiring an understanding of the concept of teamwork and the relationship between teamwork and culture.
 - Acquiring the ability to analyze the influence of culture on teamwork.
 - Understanding the special qualities of teams which function effectively on the global stage, and the challenges of working in an international team.

Due care was taken regarding grammatical aspects of the English language used in the course so that it was tailored to an appropriate level for the Japanese students expected to be taking Global TIES. The aim was to provide leadership training without language or grammar being an obstacle to participation. The course is appropriate for students with an IELTS score of 6.0, which is equivalent to a TOEIC test score of between 740~820 (British Council Japan. Gurobaru kyaria sukiru puroguramu Global TIES, 2015). Another difficulty for the staff at the University of Warwick when preparing the course was deciding how much could be expected of the students likely to participate.

A further challenge encountered with the development of Global TIES was that budgetary constraints meant that the use of video materials was limited to materials free of copyright restrictions. Many of the video materials which fitted copyright conditions looked somewhat dated. The development team would have liked to have used more video materials in the course but had to use existing materials which were then edited to make them appear more fresh and up-to-date.

Although suitable consideration was given to making Global TIES meet the requirements of the British Council in Japan and the Japanese students taking the course, the course developers at the University of Warwick do not consider the course as being country-specific in any way. The course content of Global TIES was designed to be relevant for students anywhere who have an appropriate level of English ability. Naturally, care was taken not to cause offence with any of the chosen topics of discussion. As a result, hardly any adaptation, or none at all, would be necessary for the course if it were to be used with a different target group of students. Subsequent to the development of Global TIES, the University of Warwick has also now developed an additional course called Go Global which focuses on the acquisition of transferable skills for eventual employability. Whereas Global TIES is oriented to the world of work, and is a suitable course for both students preparing to leave university and professionals of any age, Go Global is aimed at a younger age group of students. Go Global has more student-based content and can be used by universities for student orientation in advance of study abroad (Warwick Student Union. Go Global, 2015).

2.4 Outcomes

Global TIES has been used by a number of universities in the Kanto region centered on Tokyo and it has received positive feedback from the Japanese students who have taken the course. Unfortunately, the British Council in Japan has no data to show how many students have gone on to undertake a course of study at an institution of higher education in the United Kingdom. In 2013, the International Affairs Department of Kyushu University offered faculty

members at the university the opportunity to take the Global TIES course (International Affairs Department, Kyushu University, 2013). This demonstrates how a course such as Global TIES can be effective, not only for students, but for anyone wishing to improve their intercultural skills.

3 Alan Gilbert Learning Commons

The Alan Gilbert Learning Commons at the University of Manchester could be described as a “Library” with no books.

3.1 Outline

The University of Manchester can trace its roots back to 1824, but it only adopted its current form in 2004 when the Victoria University of Manchester merged with the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. At around this time, it was realized that the existing university library facilities did not have enough capacity to cope with the university’s large number of students which was now in excess of 40,000. The number of books held by the libraries was not a problem. The problem was a question of space.

The university took a decision to increase the study space available to students by building a learning commons which would be designed from the perspective of the students. The University of Manchester considered it of great importance that the design of the learning commons should be the outcome of what students actually wanted rather than being what the university thought students might want. The Alan Gilbert Learning Commons was the result of this consideration and it was one of the first learning commons in the United Kingdom. The new learning commons is named after Sir Alan Gilbert, an Australian historian and university administrator who served as the President and Vice Chancellor of the university from 2004 to 2010.

3.2 Facilities

The building opened in October 2012 and provides flexible study space for 1,000 students at a time. It is open twenty-four hours a day. This is in contrast with the University of Manchester’s main library which is only open from 8am (9am on weekends) until midnight every day. Librarians staff the front desk at the learning commons from 9am to 9pm seven days a week, with private security staff taking over responsibility for the front desk through the night. Access to the study spaces within the building is restricted to current students and staff of the University of Manchester via a card-swipe security system, but anyone can enter the foyer of the building and make use of the ground floor café which is open from 7:30am until 10:30pm. Students are allowed to bring food and drink into the learning commons, but one of the few rules is that hot food (which in practice means takeaway meals) is not permitted.

The study spaces inside the learning commons are designed to be comfortable and flexible. Much of the furniture is not fixed in place and students are encouraged to arrange the furniture to suit their convenience. The learning commons contains 400 computers, and fixed items of furniture are all equipped with plug sockets for those students who have brought their own laptop computers with them. There is also a laptop-charging locker facility in which students can safely leave a laptop or cellphone while it is being charged.

The learning commons building has four floors, the upper three of which are all divided into three zones. Towards the front of the building is the Group Work Zone, in the mid-section of the building is the so-called “Skype Zone” for self-study, even though this section does not, in fact, have any formal name, and finally towards the back of the building there is a Quiet Study Zone. It should be noted that the learning commons has no policy concerning noise; students are simply expected to respect the needs of other users of the building.

The Group Work Zone on each floor contains a selection of the thirty group study rooms in the building, the largest of which can accommodate up to twelve people. With the exception of two small group study rooms designed to be used by two people only, all the other group study rooms are equipped with a whiteboard and a computer with a media

screen. All the group study rooms are Skype-enabled. In principle, the group study rooms must not be used for self-study and if used in this way, any solitary student is asked to vacate the room to make way for a group which wishes to use the room. In most cases, group study rooms require pre-booking via the internet. In addition to the group study rooms, there are also twenty-four open-plan group study areas spread over the four floors of the building, all of which are equipped with a media screen and computer.

The so-called “Skype Zone”, for Skype-enabled self-study, is well-used for study but there is little evidence of students actually using Skype there. This could be due to students being self-conscious about holding private Skype conversations in a public place.

The Quiet Study Zone is specifically for students who wish to study without being disturbed by the chatter of other students.

One additional innovative feature of the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons is the *Zzz Zone* on the second floor. Students are always encouraged to make suggestions regarding how their learning environment at the university can be improved, and in 2014, one student proposed having a sleep pod installed in the learning commons. The sleep pod is a reclining chair with a pull down cover shielding the upper-half of the user’s body, thereby guaranteeing privacy and creating darkness around the user’s head. Users of the learning commons can use the sleep pod to take a power nap which the sleep pod itself times to a length of twenty minutes. Research shows that a short nap can improve concentration, reduce stress, and help students to recharge (The University of Manchester Library. Alan Gilbert Learning Commons, 2015). Staff at the learning commons estimate that the sleep pod facility in the *Zzz Zone* is in use about fifty percent of the time.

Finally, the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons also has a special room set aside for the use of students with special learning needs. Students who qualify to use this room are issued with a special swipe card in order to gain access, and the room is equipped with different types of computers which meet the needs of students who have visual disabilities. Magnifying equipment helps students to read documents issued in lectures, and a special printer is available for students who are dyslexic. Naturally, the whole learning commons building is barrier-free.

3.3 Design

Students of the University of Manchester had a significant degree of input for the interior design of the learning commons and provided artwork which has been reproduced in the building. There are also inspirational slogans laser-engraved into oak paneling, and tiles set into the floor commemorate famous alumni of the university. One particular feature is twenty-five purple armchairs spread throughout the building, each of which celebrates the life and achievements of one of the Nobel prizewinners connected with the University of Manchester. The external wall of the learning commons features a video screen for broadcasting a live-feed of occasions such as graduation ceremonies, and at other times, it displays information to students (Jones, 2013, p.14). The Wi-Fi access throughout the learning commons also extends to the terrace around the building, and when weather permits, deckchairs are available from the front desk for use in the terrace space.

4 Conclusion

The Global TIES course and the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons are two good examples of how British universities are facing up to the challenges of the modern environment for higher education.

Global TIES is a course which harnesses modern technology to provide students in one country, in this case, Japan, with a taste of the educational style available in another country. In addition, Global TIES responds to clearly-defined modern needs. First, it responds to the desire of the Japanese government to nurture global human resources, and second, it enables the British Council in Japan to offer Japanese university students the opportunity to experience the learning style of a British university. Global TIES could easily be a forerunner of a potential future style of higher

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education in which students enrolled at one institution can take accredited courses via online seminars being taught from another country.

The most interesting aspect of the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons is how the University of Manchester set out with the intention of creating a learning environment that was not what the designers thought the students might wish for, but which was designed in response to the wishes of the students themselves. It is to be expected that any showcase modern building will be well-designed, barrier-free, and will incorporate energy-saving features; the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons satisfies all of these conditions, but more than this it continues to respond to the voice of the student body of the university. For example, users of the learning commons have identified a need for more chairs fitted with tablet-desks enabling laptop use because many of the coffee tables currently provided are too low for using a laptop computer over an extended period of time. Could the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons be a foretaste of a future in which all books are available online and in which all libraries contain no traditional books at all?

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