Internationalization of Quality Assurance and Management of Higher Education

Best Practices of International Student Assessment:
the Arcadia University International MBA Case Study

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Abstract: Assessment is always challenging. Whether we are administrators of programs, teaching faculty, staff, graduate or undergraduate students, and the practice of assessment evokes fears of judgment, fears of public failure, and most significantly, fears of change. Because of this, we often assess with a hesitant hand, gingerly prodding the successes and challenges at all levels of our institutions, hoping that—in this moment, at least—we are achieving the goals which we claim that we're achieving and are doing so with integrity and a clear understanding of student needs.

Keywords: International Student Assessment; MBA; international programs

Attending to our focus here and taking a close look at student assessment in international programs, we find that because of what some call "the cultural divide," we double the number of challenges which already exist. Cultural differences between the students, faculty and those administrators conducting the research might hinder effective assessment practices simply because of differing cultural values systems concerning education, different expectations, and even the relationship of the two or more institutions involved. In considering these challenges in international student assessment, I'd like to call our attention to Dr. Thomas Angelo's statement concerning the value of assessment in all educational environments. He writes:

When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education. (Angelo, 1995, p. 7)

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If we pay attention to Dr. Angelo's goals of assessment, we might notice something interesting. Assessment here maintains the same goals and objectives that we might consider the core of all structures and types of international education:

When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us ***focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture*** dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education. (Angelo 1995, pp. 7-9, emphasis mine)

Such an environment of shared core goals and values is evidence that those complex difficulties of "best practices" of assessment and "best practices" of international education are poised to work together in thoughtful and compelling ways. To that end, Mary Theresa Taglang and I have compiled several philosophical thoughts and practical solutions to what we have come to understand not as a "cultural divide" in assessing international students and their programs effectively, but as an opportunity to uphold the integrity of our commitment to implementing the best practices of both assessment and international education in the same venues.

To talk about best practices in this environment where two parallel cultural values systems of education come together, we must approach the process clearly and honestly in **four stages**. In the first stage, we must assess (1) ourselves and our own cultural assumptions about how we value education, and our perceptions about the values and goals of education in other cultures. The practice of assessment is not just conducted on paper, and not just at the end of the year or when it is necessary for accreditation. We assess the effectiveness of our practices each day that we discuss and adapt them to new situations. But where we must start in this in international programs is with understanding how and why we approach the process the way we do, and with likewise understanding our own approach to education. To what degree…and in what structures… do we place value on education? Do we value different disciplines differently? How does this system of value entwine with our values concerning the careers to which these disciplines lead? Are we, in the end, clear about how we value education to our students, to each other, and to ourselves? This self-perception in many ways is the most involved, time consuming, surprising and difficult stage of the process, but it is essential in any practice of purposeful assessment.

Stage two turns from internal exploration to outward, and explores the (2) relationship to our international partner institution. I'd like to emphasize here that this stage does not assess the partner; it does not suggest that the assessment turn invasive and judgmental. Instead, exploring the relationship between two institutions may be approached with focused attention to the workings of the relationship itself…the processes, the structures, and the interactions which were

created in order to maintain the international partnership. Such an exploration necessitates the self-awareness achieved in Stage 1, and implements it in ways which allow for effective decision-making. We might ask whether our record-keeping strategies comply with the requirements of the accrediting bodies for the program. If they do not, are there adjustments which need to be made simply in terms of data records, or are there cultural factors which influence the data set in the student's file. The example which comes to mind first for us is the surname-given name-Western name relationship for our Asian students, in which fields they appear in our records, and which name is printed on their diploma. How might we minimize this confusion in the application process? How might we build systems together which maintain the integrity of the student records?

The third stage, and the one Mary Theresa will explore a bit more closely in a moment, focuses on (3) student progress through the program. This is in many ways the most complex of the stages to approach, considering that so many factors influence student progress, including but not limited to student valuing of their education, the student's past experience, the willingness of the partner institution to engage the student thoroughly, and significantly, the effectiveness of the relationship between the two international partner institutions assessed in Stage 2. Is the student making adequate progress? What is holding the student back? Is it personal? Cultural? What do these answers tell us about the effectiveness of our perception of educational values in the partner culture? About the effectiveness of the program's incorporation and attention to student cultural needs and perceptions?

The fourth stage is the (4) assessment of the assessment process itself, the stage which builds the framework for exploring our insights and creates the plan which celebrates the successes and amends the challenges of the partnership. Here, we might ask at what points did our own cultural values and perceptions of education benefit the assessment process, and where did it hinder our work? How we might use the insights gained about ourselves and the international partnership to move forward and build a more effective and beneficial relationship? And finally, where might we go from here to further build a shared academic culture of education for our students and ourselves?

As you can see, these best practices of international assessment fold back on themselves, expanding the interpretations and informing the insights at each stage. But while most assessment plans generally follow these stages and provide insights into whether we're actually doing what we think we're doing, we must be cognizant of the additional elements at work in assessing international partnerships and programs. Different cultural systems and the values that each partner upholds are not a hindrance to effective assessment strategies; they are instead a new way— a parallel way—of looking at the relationship of institutions, programs, and the students who we hope to provide with a dynamic, global education.

To see one aspect of this approach in practice, I'd like to turn the presentation over to my colleague, Mary Theresa Taglang, the Director of Graduate Programs in the School of Global Business at Arcadia University.

Case Study: Arcadia International MBA program at Aventis School of Management, Singapore

The Arcadia University MBA, in partnership with Aventis School of Management in Singapore, offers a unique opportunity for students to engage in an MBA program with a global perspective. This program will serve as our case study here, as we explore the third Stage of the best practices of international program assessment. We choose the third stage, that of addressing the assessment of student experiences and outcomes, because it is the most dynamic and varied of the stages, and this—as you might guess—provides for many examples.

To provide a bit of context for the program Arcadia's MBA program through Aventis is delivered over the course of 12 months and features 10 required courses. It is designed for the fully employed with each course is taught over the course of two weekends per month. Due to the highly technical background of candidates for the program two courses in business fundamentals provide a foundation in the following areas: Fundamentals of Accounting, and Corporate Finance, Fixed Income, Derivatives and Economics. Four cohorts, each averaging 25 students, are admitted yearly. The cohort format allows students to form both a support for one another and an enduring professional network. In May of each year, students are invited to Arcadia's commencement in Glenside Pennsylvania, but otherwise participate in a graduation ceremony at Aventis.

The intention to bring the Arcadia University International M.B.A. into Singapore, the hub of South East Asia, aligned with Aventis's intentions to provide business owners, managers and other professionals with a high-quality American M.B.A. program in their quest to become a superior decision maker who is well prepared for the challenges of senior and international management in the modern global workplace.

Here begins the very first assessment of both ourselves, and of student desire and objectives which we hope to nurture in our international partnership. Is the geographic location one that will support success for both students and the program? Do our values concerning education as both a method of self-improvement and as a way of developing critical insights and critical thinking skills about the global nature of all business complement the students' desires for such a program? Clearly it is, and clearly it does. Arcadia joined the ranks of many western schools who have established programs there competing in this highly educated, English language dominant destination. Albeit a small city, employees in the many managers and leaders in varieties of multinational corporations (MNCs)

find themselves pressured to improve their professional standing by pursuing additional education while fully employed. In this way, we begin to develop an image of the target demographic of students and deepen our perception of student values and objectives for their education.

Beyond the initial analysis of student objectives and values appropriate in the Singaporean context, the next most important step in our best practices of self-reflection and student assessment was to establish the specific criteria for the type of candidate we hoped to attract, and then develop a candidate-assessment process which evaluated each candidate against the criteria and also their potential for success.

The highly experienced candidates from MNCs or entrepreneurial ventures defined the type of candidate we sought in the Singapore program. Singapore has one of the highest standards of education and has a wealth of types of institutions, from polytechnics to universities to trade schools. Our first challenge in implementing the high standards of the program arose here, in interpreting multiple transcripts. Because education in Singapore carries with it a high value, we discovered that many of our candidates applied with many and various transcripts—in English, Chinese, and Hindi, diploma and degrees from accredited institutions from all over the world and from non-accredited international businesses and organizations. Students, we noted, did not follow familiar career paths and emerged from varieties of programs and grading systems. We spent (and are still spending) significant time and effort interpreting each student's application materials, but over time, we have come to understand how to read each of the transcripts in context, broadly acknowledging the value and pride of the Singaporean students in each accomplishment while balancing our own values in accredited institutions versus industry programs. As you might guess, we have had to interpret and reinterpret these international transcripts within the Singaporean context, and we have surprised ourselves in how this negotiation of values reveals our own values system to us.

Students are admitted after a review of their credentials which include undergraduate transcripts, work experience (which is where several of the industry diplomas and transcripts are considered), resume, a TOEFL score of 510 or higher (?) and an essay. A portfolio approach is utilized to assess intellectual performance and potential, career progression, the ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the peer group, and the likelihood of continued professional success.

These students bring diverse educational, professional and cultures of their own experiences and interpretations of doing business in a global environment, and enhance the curriculum of the program, and in the end, each other's experience in the program.

After constructing a viable demographic—or "ideal student," Arcadia University's International M.B.A. launched in August 2010 with its first cohort of 29 students. More than half of the participants were senior managers and directors of multinational corporations such as Apple Inc., Honeywell, IBM, Panasonic, Hyatt International and Visa International. These were individuals whose roles in their organizations were signficant and who brought years of experience to this initial cohort. Most participants in the program were seasoned executives with 10 or more years of work experience. As you might imagine, the reality of our perception of that ideal student far exceeded our expectations. The experience which the students brought to the classroom informed and supported many of the concepts explored in the course content, and added a distinct dimension of the students being experts in many ways.

International Student Challenges

Several key factors must be considered in the student assessments of an international MBA program. Among them is the impact of the culture on education and learning style. In the American style of education, highly individualistic and heightened interaction with one another defines the experience. Students are expected to participate in classroom discussion with a portion of the evaluation of the students' success is based on their level of contribution. Understanding, interpreting and critical-thinking have been buzzwords in American education for decades, and have filtered through nearly all disciplines' pedagogies. Team projects, group work and exercises where students apply their knowledge to demonstrate understanding are ubiquitous.

Many of the students in the Arcadia IMBA program emerge from Asian-style education, which focuses on lecture and exams. In a setting where multiple cultures, learning styles and educational values intersect, how does a faculty member evaluate student success different social, cultural and educational backgrounds? And how does that faculty do so when the students are older, experienced individuals who have proven that they can successfully function in the Singaporean business environment?

Recognizing that methods of traditional Western assessment may not accurately reflect the uniqueness of the setting, Arcadia and Aventis have proposed a set of measures that take into account individual components.

We know that successful student outcomes in large part depend on the intellectual and professional potential of the candidate, and that the candidates applying to the IMBA program are driven by personal goals and practical experience in problem-solving. To this end, greater emphasis on evaluating candidates prior to admission resulted in more attention to the candidates' personal goals to become effective

decision-makers in global industry. This has resulted in classrooms where students enter as equals, confident in the content of the course and confident of the experience and insights of the network of students surrounding them. Such confidence supports the students to try harder, do more, and engage more thoughtfully in the classroom…resulting in better grades and positive educational experiences.

And this positive experience results in something else which is incredibly valuable for our assessment of all aspects of the program. Student feedback at all levels flows freely, making it much easier for faculty to evaluate their classes, the Arcadia and Aventis staff to monitor student progress and questions, and the administrators of both programs to continually re-evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum at all levels. On a side note…the alumni of the Arcadia Singapore IMBA are incredibly connected and active, keeping in touch with the Aventis alumni group, but also desiring continued access to the alumni page and emails from the US campus.

Finally, managing the "nuts and bolts" of the administrative work related to student assessment is ongoing. What role does technology play in mitigating a 12 hour time difference? Is there a better way to reflect, or accommodate, differences in names and birthdates, for instance, on our myriad requests for paperwork? How might we discover the truths of the experiences and tribulations of individual students when we are on the other side of the globe? We have discovered from our experience with Aventis School of Management in Singapore that underpinning everything we do and every decision we make with a conscious (and self-conscious) culture of assessment works to alleviate the future fears and hesitations of assessment, both of students and of the international relationship supporting the program.

Conclusion

Assessing students in relation to the product we strive to deliver—an educated graduate able to make ethical decisions in a complex global environment—contributes to the thoughtful review folded into the Arcadia mission. And as we enter into Stage 4 of our best practices in international programs—Assessing the Assessment—we find that the structures we have set in place to evaluate students coming into our international program carries with it connections and insights into other areas which we likewise assess throughout.

Considering the background of our students who come primarily from Asian-style lecture-and-exam degree programs, does our faculty successfully provide the in-class guidance necessary for achieving the transition between the pedagogical styles? With our students possessing 10-20 years of industry experience, can our faculty—most with Ph.D.'s—say that they possess as much or more knowledge of

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industry as our students? Is the curriculum challenging and useful to the students, and does it acknowledge the quickly-shifting trends of modern global business and industry? Is the staff not only effective in our relationship, but also effective for the students, quickly providing useful information and answers, thereby upholding and creating that positive student experience discussed earlier? The answers to these questions are rooted in student assessment, self-assessment, faculty assessment and the assessment of the curriculum, revealing a web of assessment practices which is informed by cultural understanding. In this way, the best practices of assessment in the Arcadia IMBA—or any international program—can weave together a focus on creating a clear, shared academic culture which accommodates the nuances of culture and geography, yet maintains academic integrity and upholds the missions of both institutions.

References

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