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Article

Delivering information literacy support internationally: a report of a visit to the University of Nottingham's overseas campuses

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1. Background

In 2000, the University of Nottingham opened the first campus of a British university in Malaysia. This was closely followed in 2004 with the opening of the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, the first Sino-foreign university to open its doors in China, with the full approval of the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Administration Building, University of Nottingham, Ningbo Campus, China

The campuses offer British degree programmes from The University of Nottingham, UK, which shapes the approach to teaching in China and Malaysia. Degree courses are subject to the same quality assurance processes as the Nottingham campus and are taught fully in English. This short report is based on a recent visit by a UK librarian to the Chinese and Malaysian campuses. The views expressed are a personal reflection about the information literacy (IL) support that librarians working at these international campuses offer to their students.

2. Faculty structure

Three faculties exist at the China campus: Arts and Education; Science and Engineering and Social Sciences. The largest number of students study business; e the Faculty of Science and Engineering is fairly new, though set to expand significantly, offering degrees in computer science and engineering.

The Malaysian campus has a slightly different structure with three faculties: Arts and Social Sciences, Engineering and Science. Again, business attracts the most students, but there is a greater range of arts and social sciences courses offered. The Faculty of Science encompasses biomedical sciences, biosciences, computer science, geography, pharmacy and psychology, and the Faculty of Engineering covers the main engineering disciplines.

All degrees follow the same module structure as the UK and allow students to move between the different campuses, whether for one semester only or through more formal 2+2 programmes, where students study the first two years at an international campus and the final two years in the UK.

3. Student population

Both campuses are similar in size, currently attracting around 5,000 students; these are mostly undergraduates, but there are a growing number of Master's courses and PhD students. In China, students are mainly Chinese nationals, whereas the Malaysian cohorts are more internationally diverse. Academic staff at both campuses come from a range of countries and include some seconded staff from Nottingham in the UK. Administrative staff, including library staff, are usually nationals from Malaysia or China.

4. Specific issues

In March 2013 I had the opportunity to visit both campuses, to share experiences and knowledge but principally to support the delivery of IL. My two-week trip provided some insight into some of the issues faced by the library staff at the campuses.

4.1 Staffing structure

The library staffing structure is small, and staff undertake more varied roles than in the UK. The campuses are only just beginning to employ subject librarians; it is difficult to provide dedicated subject support, particularly in the more scientific disciplines where staff have less academic subject knowledge. During my visit, library managers discussed the difficulty of finding employees who have a combination a library qualification, speak and write English well, plus possess knowledge of a more scientific subject area. Many of the staff employed do not have library qualifications or even any previous library work experience. Current staff are very enthusiastic, but there is a steep learning curve and a need for intensive training programmes to introduce them to the relevant resources and enable them to deliver IL training confidently.

4.2 Access to resources

The same library and IT systems are rolled out across the three campuses, but each campus has their own instance of the library catalogue, electronic resource discovery system, online reading lists and virtual learning environment. Wherever possible, UK licences have been extended to cover students at the international campuses, but not all publishers are able to cooperate. Chinese agents must be used in China, where access needs to be obtained separately, sometimes leading to use of the Chinese or US interface or the need to use different authentication systems. This is challenging for library staff delivering IL support due to confusion over access routes and the aim to teach students how to use interfaces that are the same across the different campuses to aid cross-campus mobility.

4.3 Learning styles of students

The transition between school and university is difficult for any student, but the teaching style in Chinese schools and also Chinese universities is geared toward information provision rather than information gathering. This can pose difficulties for students who may never have faced having to find literature for themselves or evaluate information that they find. Consequently, there is an even greater demand for IL teaching.

5. Teaching techniques

While I was in China and Malaysia I carried out several training sessions, both to staff and students, and afterwards we discussed whether the way in which I delivered the content differed from what the library staff would normally do. The key differences seemed to be:

- **Content**: I covered less content in a single session, based on my experience of students only taking in a limited amount of information. This is exacerbated when the teacher is delivering training in a second language and the students are receiving it in a second language. In the UK, we can experience problems integrating training into the curriculum; this integration is similarly difficult at our international campuses. Often library staff will only see the students once during their course and consequently there is a tendency to cram everything a student needs to know into a one-hour session.

- **Structure:** The library staff commented on the logical and easy to follow structure that I'd used in my teaching, rather than flitting from one thing to another, ending up with multiple windows open. I didn't have time to discuss this with staff in more detail but I think this may be related to a lack of experience in teaching and perhaps not focusing on the key aims or learning objectives of the session.

- **Delivery**: Many of the library staff have little experience in teaching or presenting and perhaps require more confidence in delivering the content in an engaging way. Unlike the UK, where we have a very active support network for IL teaching among librarians, the staff at the international campuses have little to compare themselves against or opportunities to discuss ideas. We discussed the benefits of online tutorials that could back up face-to-face teaching, particularly as many of the students in China understand written English better than spoken English.

My two-week visit provided enormous insight into the challenges faced by our international campuses, including: difficulties in accessing resources in a consistent way to provide consistency of student experience; lack of training experience of library staff and lack of a local support network for IL; difficulties in embedding training within the curriculum; and the different learning styles and language barriers of local students. However, I also came away with a sense of the huge amount of good work and enthusiasm shown by my colleagues in the face of these challenges. We all came away with a better shared understanding of what we need to do in the future to better support the student experience of a global university.