

# Developing Students' Intercultural Competence Through Virtual Global Apprenticeship Programme---A Case Study of A Chinese Private University

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**Abstract:** The dramatic development of virtual products can be seen as one of the most focused field for every industry. The global outbreak of covid-19 has pushed the development of virtual products, because every industry need to locate a quick replacement for their daily operation. Enormous online products appeared under this situation, but the feasibility and desired outcome need to be discussed when the covid-19 situation end. Currently it is still a debate that this online form will only used as a tentative replacement for emergency or it can be kept for normal operation. This article mainly focused on the discussion virtual global apprenticeship programme, namely online global platform for university's students internship, applied to Chinese University by analyzing the reflective study of a Chinese private university, who has conducted the first time online internship under the unexpected covid-19 situation. The discussion of the programme's outcome and the suggestion of future improvement will given in this article.

**Keywords:** Virtual product; Desired outcome; Reflective case study; Chinese private university; Intercultural competence

## 1. Background

D Nylén, & J Holmström.(2015) addressed the importance of delivering digital product for achieving business goal, and serious consideration about control and predict product needed to be discussed. The Chinese education industry, which is one of the most booming industry, has undoubtedly stepped into the digital technology innovation.<sup>[3]</sup> From Guan Jia(2014) illustrated the developmental situation, tendency and experience of educational product in Chinese market, it has introduced the popularity and variety of digital products and reveals the significance of the existing products and also pointed out the concerning issues with its expanding scale.<sup>[4]</sup> After the outbreak of Covid-19, the great demands of online educational products pushed the product development. Universities, as one of the most important market of online education, were searching online educational product with high quality, to replace the unexpected situation of international exchange. The programme introduced in this article is considered as the chosen online educational product under such situation. The virtual global apprenticeship programme(VGA) was a online educational product developed by an India company called Ingenious Face(IF), who specialized in gathering global resources for build the internship platform. The VGA programme aims to help students in their pre-employment stage, prepare their employment readiness such as awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills for future career development. In the over past few years, hundreds of students have been benefited from this programme. It runs well in the European market and Indian market. The Asian market is almost blank space to be researched and developed. Heilongjiang International University(HIU), established in 1993, located in northeast of China, is a Chinese high-ranked private university focused on foreign language teaching and research. The international strategy is one of the most important developmental strategies, the university has been concentrating for international strategic transition, which means developing more significant international cooperation and exchange with the global partners instead of the traditional students and teachers' exchange. The unexpected outbreak of covid-19 global crisis strongly hindered the international exchange activity for the university. Under this consideration the university started looking for the online programme which can be beneficial for the university's students. Under the situation of common interests and mutual need, the first trail of cooperation between HIU and IF implemented the VGA programme for the experiment.

## 2. Research methods

10 students were chosen as the participants by stratified sampling, they all from business-related major and proficient in English language use. A qualitative research has been conducted when proceeding the programme. Except the 10 participants, the teach coach from the HIU, and the coordinator from IF are also the research respondents for interview. The basic research objectives are: (1) Analyze the feedback for their competence improvement. (2) Examine the feasibility for the VGA programme for HIU and. (3) future improvement and suggestion for VGA. The duration of the first time duration is two months. All these students were organized by the programme coordinator, getting involved in many activities, which can be categorized into three parts. First one is about

communication, by online meeting and Email connection, which aims to practice the intercultural skill. Part two is about the soft skill such as creative and critical thinking skill practice. Part three focused on the business professional knowledge. Students are separated into three groups, each group will become the interns for a global company, the company mentor will give students supportive instructions for their assigned tasks. After each session, the coach from HIU and the coordinator from IF will communicate the performance of participants for the past period of their learning process. All the communicative record will be used as the analyzed data for the research.

### 3. Difficulties and challenges

There are two uncontrollable limitations when conducting this programme. Firstly, it is the time difference. Three groups connected with three international company, which based in Israel, Singapore and Netherland, the coordinator based in India, and all the participants in China, so at least three different time need to be coordinated when having online meeting. Therefore, all the meetings were arranged at night time around 8pm. The second limitation is about the network, there is no instant social media app, the email communication seems as the only way. And students in China could not use the IF online communicative system called dashboard, which brought convenience for students, coordinator and their connected company.

### 4. Research findings

All the interview data were collected and recorded. Three experts from research field decoded the data and find the keyword to describe the given questions. After conclude the analyzed data, the research questions can be discussed.

Firstly, What are the competences improved or focused by the programme? According to the programme design of VGA, every assignments and communication have clear targets for students' improvement. In other words, students' weaknesses also can be diagnosed by various tasks. After the first month participation, the coordinator gave the feedback of students performance of "Overall quality of the assignments need to be improved", and they also described their performance with specific points, including missing the weekly check-in activity, lack of individual meeting with their mentor, lack of acknowledging work emails, lack of active participation and lack of initiative to learn. The listed points basically can be concluded into three issues: attitude problem, professional Knowledge and cross-culture awareness and communication. For quickly save the situation, all students are gathered and interviewed. After analyze participants' feedback, the findings can be drawn as following. First of all, the students were chosen purposeful and fully acknowledge the importance of this participation, they were willingly to engage in. They may have difficulties but not attitude problem. Then, indeed, they lack of professional knowledge, but students addressed that the related professional knowledge are not very difficult to learn. It is commonly agreed that they seriously have some intercultural communication problems. There are certain things that they were not aware of, and sometimes they did not know what appropriate ways to respond. Afterwards, students are arranged to have training session about some intercultural knowledge and skills. At the end, nine participants out of ten have achieved the final certificate with their assessment comments and marks. From the whole process of the VGA, the intercultural competence can be drawn as the focal points for the participants. In addition, other competences were developed in the process, however, the intercultural skill can be seen as the fundamental bridge to help delivering other skills and knowledge, and keep the communication efficiency. Therefore, developing intercultural competence comes to the first and crucial discussion.

### 5. The feasibility of VGA programme

From the point of examine feasibility for HIU, it brings more significance to this research. Because the programme is totally creative attempt for Chinese market, if the feasibility shows positive trend, the potential market will be widely developed. And the VGA products may in great demand if under systematic plan. To some extent, it can be said as feasible implementation for certain university, whose aim to developing students' employability enhancement, focusing global talents education, and are flexible when facing changes and challenges. Due to every university has its own developing targets, so the programme may not suit every market. However, for HIU, a private university in northeast of China, which mainly focus on applied employability development, the programme can be seen as the perfectly match.

### 6. Suggestions for future improvement

People often misunderstood the term of intercultural competence simply as "communicate with foreigners in foreign language". As the popularity of developing cultural intelligence attracting more attention nowadays, many models and explanation to clarify the complexity of intercultural competence has shown. Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) gave one that was easily understood, which discussed the intercultural competence as "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world", the three levels, cognitive, affective and behavioral, namely mind-set, heart-set and skill-set.<sup>[6]</sup> many discussion of researchers have suggested that learning intercultural competence can be considered as a developmental process. (Beamer, 1992; Bennett, 1986; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). people can cumulatively learn things related to intercultural competence by time, experiences, and deliberate reflection.<sup>[2]</sup> In other words, intercultural competence cannot be really improved from a simple lecture or fluent use of foreign language.<sup>[1]</sup> It is a comprehensive competence from raising awareness to build attitude, and to adjust adaptability.<sup>[5]</sup> A well-designed intervention activity with clear objectives should be the most possible solution to improve the intercultural competence.

From the side of university, the focal problem is about the support, which assist students go through the process. The university must pay their attention to the performance of students. The outcome might not be optimistic if students were left alone to deal with the programme without the supported training or lecture from their university. Therefore, once the university decided to bring this programme to daily operation, a supported system should better be built for achieve desired results. In the case of HIU, a possible solution has been made after the first time trail. A public elective course was designed to support the programme. The course aimed to mainly enhance students' intercultural competence, professional knowledge and applied language skill. During the process, some

engaging activity will also help to improve students' self-awareness ability, critical thinking, team building and creative thinking ability. This course will systematically prepare students' for their participation in the programme. For instance, course will start two weeks earlier before the programme initiative. Students will start to learn the intercultural knowledge, and practice the related skill like email writing and communication. And when the programme start, all the assignment and task to bring to classroom for discussion and sharing, so that all the students can understand the knowledge and apply to the real case. And most importantly, they can really make good use of the programme, and the quality of their assignment can be greatly improved.

From the side of company, Chinese market is definitely with great potentiality to explore, as so many business has attempted to enter this market. But with the consideration of the different culture background, many challenges should be taken into serious consideration. Except to solve the limitation of communication platform and coordinate the time difference, some characteristic of target customer should be researched. For instance, the Chinese students has very common characteristics of public speaking ability, they are shy to talk and share. It is a difficulty especially for online communication. How to break ice at the first time need to well-designed if desired feedback is expected from the students. Additionally, some attractive industry and job positions preference can be researched as well, students can be greatly motivated once they find something really attractive. Therefore, with well researched diagnose and designed engaging activities with proper way of communication, the programme can be well spread among Chinese universities who share the common developmental objectives. A word of mouth recommendation will be the most powerful promotion tool one day when the programme achieved certain results.

## 7. Conclusion

This research shows certain significance for online educational products consideration, especially for Chinese Universities. There are certain limitation existed, firstly the research target chosen is not typical enough to represent all the Chinese private universities, especially the focal university in this case. The number of students involved in is not sufficient. Once the number of participated students researched a certain number, more systematical research methods shall be replied to enhance the research findings. It is certainly that more further related research need to be developed to support the development of online education product.

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