

# LARGE GROUPS, LANGUAGE SUPPORT, AND MOBILE LEARNING: HOW AN UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS MODULE IS RESPONDING TO RECENT GLOBAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how an undergraduate Business module at an English-medium university in China has responded to three recent global trends in higher education: massification; growth in non-first-language English speakers engaging in English-medium study; and growth in mobile internet access. Details are given about the approaches and activities employed to respond to these trends. It is hoped that other practitioners, who are likely to be affected by the same trends, may find some of the responses described here to be applicable to their own context.

## INTRODUCTION

Three recent global trends that are likely to play a significant role in shaping the future of higher education are: the massification of (i.e. expansion in access to) higher education (Altbach, 2007); the growth in numbers of non-first-language English speakers studying in English (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009); and the growth in mobile internet access (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). This report considers how MAN001, a Year 1 Semester 1 undergraduate Business module at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) with over 1000 enrolled students, has responded to these three trends to provide students with a future-oriented educational experience.

## BACKGROUND

XJTLU is a transnational English-medium university located in Suzhou, China. It has growing student numbers, with the annual intake of new Year 1 students now exceeding 3000. Most students are from mainland China, and enter the university based on their overall GaoKao (National Higher Education Entrance Examination) score, with no specific English language requirement. All students are expected to complete their studies in English, and are required to take English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules in their first two years to support them in doing this. In recent years, one innovative course evolution has been the offering of joint delivery modules to provide students with additional language/study skills assistance outside of EAP provision. These modules involve the delivery of subject-specific content (delivered by the academic department) together with embedded language and study skills support (delivered by the Language Centre). One such module is a Business Essentials module (MAN001), which is taken by all Business School students at XJTLU, and as such necessitates delivery to over 1000 students. Some of the challenges faced in the delivery of MAN001 can be seen as representative of wider issues

resulting from the current global trends of: the massification of higher education (Altbach, 2007), as education becomes less elitist and more universal (Trow, 2007); difficulties in supporting a growth in numbers of non-first language English speakers studying academic content through this language (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009); and, a growth in mobile internet access (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009), which can challenge traditional modes of delivery in terms of appropriateness.

## CHALLENGE 1:

### Pressure on educational delivery from the massification of higher education

In recent years, there have been more students participating in higher education globally (International Strategy Office, 2015). However, this rapid increase in student enrolment brings in the pressure for educators to deliver massive classes, and significantly changes higher education systems (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Considering the fact that massification of higher education is becoming a norm, it is important to understand the challenges and pressure from this massification, and more importantly how to respond to these challenges. It has been considered that the number of students in a class affects the quality of the learning environment (Cuseo, 2007). Large class learning environments tend to reinforce a didactic teaching style, which has been criticised as lacking of interactions between the lecturer and students. There were over 1000 students registered on MAN001, and this large number of students constrained options for delivery.

### Response

In order to ensure the quality of learning, we combined several strategies to respond to the challenges caused by the large number of students. Firstly, we broke down the number of students by multiple deliveries of the same lecture and seminars. We adopted 3\*2 hour sessions per

week to deliver content lectures for students. So in each lecture room, there were around 300 students. We also provided 8\*1 hour sessions per week to deliver language and study skills support seminars for students, with class sizes of 100-150 students. The seminars were delivered in a large, flat space conducive to group work, and students engaged in interactive activities in small groups of 7-8 students during these sessions.

Secondly, peer discussion and chatroom feedback were used during lectures to involve students' participation in the learning process. During MAN001 lectures, after explaining the important concepts or framework, the lecturer would give specific discussion questions, such as real business examples or theoretical debating questions, and ask students to discuss these with their peers. Students would then be encouraged to share their thoughts after their discussions. An online chatroom shown in front of the big lecture room was utilised for students to express their opinions, which allowed for the elicitation of responses to questions from the whole lecture theatre, not just a few rows at the front. Peer discussion and chatroom feedback allowed students to participate actively in the lectures, rather than just passively listening to content delivered by the lecturer.

Thirdly, extensive activities on XJTLU's Moodle-based virtual learning environment helped students communicate with peers and lecturers. We set up lecture preview videos and quizzes before each lecture to give students a general idea of what to expect. After lectures, there were also review quizzes for students to check what they had learned. In addition, there were discussion forums for each lecture where students could communicate and discuss with peers and lecturers. These activities on Moodle helped to improve interaction among students and lecturers. Around 80% of students participated in these formative activities during the ▶

first half of the semester; however, participation dropped during the second half of the semester, possibly as a result of pressure from summative assignment deadlines on other modules.

#### Future plans

We believe our combined lecture and seminar approach improved students' learning experience. Student satisfaction with the module was higher than the previous year. However, there is always room to improve. One possible approach for the future is to adopt a "flipped classroom" approach, by providing online lectures with focus on explaining basic concepts and frameworks. Then, during lecture time, we can focus more on interactive activities.

#### CHALLENGE 2:

##### Growth in numbers of non-first language English Speakers studying academic content through English

As English-medium higher education programmes have expanded, so too have the numbers of students who do not speak English as a first language studying on these programmes (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). In the case of MAN001, most students were from mainland China, and entered the University without a specific English language entry requirement. With this in mind, an important concern was how to provide English language and study skills support to assist these students with the transition from L1-medium instruction settings to English-medium education, while simultaneously aiding the more general transition from high school to university. In the main, language and study skills support activities were delivered through the seminar sessions, and through online activities.

#### RESPONSE

##### In seminars

In the seminars, language and study support took a variety of forms. Guidance was given on note-taking by introducing

students to the Cornell method (Cornell University Learning Strategies Center, 2016). This is a note-taking system where students add self-test questions and summary paragraphs to their notes after lectures. Lecture content was also reviewed via peer comparison of notes and online quizzes; vocabulary for the next lecture was previewed (for example, through group quizzes and categorisation activities); discussion tasks were run based on the next lecture's topic; skimming and scanning tasks were devised with lecture pre-readings; and timed writing based on previous lecture topics was practiced in preparation for the final exam, with both generic tutor feedback and peer feedback provided.

##### Online

Online support, via Moodle, was also provided. Pre-lecture, this included introductory lecture videos with accompanying quizzes; engaging students in the construction of an online vocabulary glossary which built up as the semester progressed; online pre-readings, with key sections highlighted where appropriate; and downloadable note-taking sheets, tailored to the content of the next lecture. After each lecture, note-taking review activities were provided online, which encouraged peer feedback. These included students sharing self-test questions via a forum, as well as students recording review podcasts in groups and sharing these with the rest of the module. In addition, the language and study skills support tutors recorded weekly summary podcasts with volunteer students to review the material covered. These podcasts were then shared with the whole module. In terms of assessment preparation, students were tasked with creating practice exam multiple-choice questions based on lecture content, and were given short practice writing assignments. These were peer assessed online, and generic feedback was also given by the language support tutors, based on a sample of submissions.

#### FUTURE PLANS

As student feedback reported that Language Centre support was helpful, we plan to use similar activities in the next iteration of the module. It is also worth noting that students who completed more support activities online and attended more seminars performed better on module assessments, which again suggests that the activities were useful for students. The main challenge for the coming year is how to incentivise non-participating students to participate. One idea that has been discussed in this regard is linking participation in activities to grading. We are also considering reorganising online activities into essential and optional categories, to make sure that students focus their energies on the most important tasks as a priority.

#### CHALLENGE 3:

##### Growth in mobile internet access

One further global trend of importance to higher education today is the growth of mobile internet access among students (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Indeed, it would be difficult to find a student on campus at XJTLU who does not own an internet-enabled mobile phone, and many of these students access these mobile devices on a regular basis, including when in class. To respond to this situation, we considered how this mobile internet connectivity could be used to enhance, rather than distract from, student learning on MAN001.

#### RESPONSE

##### In lectures

As noted above, we established the practice in MAN001 lectures of posing discussion questions, and then asking students to share their responses via a Moodle chatroom that was visible at the front of the lecture theatre. Students were encouraged to contribute to the chatroom using their mobile devices. In large lectures of 300 or more students, this allowed for a greater quantity of responses than would have been possible by simply approaching individual students

with a microphone (a practice which normally only results in responses from students in the first row or two). Overall, the use of the mobile-accessible chatroom appeared to add a greater degree of interactivity to lectures than had existed previously.

##### In seminars

In the large seminar sessions on MAN001, one major way in which students were asked to use their mobile phones was to respond to lecture content review questions near the start of sessions. Multiple-choice questions were set up on Moodle, and students were required to answer them using their mobile phones, with the popularity of each answer option displaying in real time on the projector screen in the room. This activity was a quick way to gauge what content students had and had not understood, while also providing information about attendance in these large group sessions. In addition, we asked students to use their mobile phones in class to take part in quick opinion polls. These focussed on, for example, how difficult they found particular topics, or which resources they had found most helpful for their study on the module.

Another feature of students' mobile phones that we made use of was the camera. As MAN001 had a written final exam, we asked students to do short practice writing assignments in some seminar classes. The numbers of students meant that it was not possible to grade all of these, so instead we asked students to take photos of their work in class and upload them to an image gallery on Moodle to share with other students. We were then able to give general feedback on some of the photos in class. Asking students to share their work in this way gave them an audience for their writing, which would not have existed if they had only reviewed their work by themselves.

One final way that we asked

students to use their mobile phones in seminar classes was to access resources on Moodle (e.g. PDF's of lecture slides and readings) and to look up definitions of words, when this was required during class activities. This meant that students could access almost all of the resources they needed for class through their phones, which reduced the need for paper handouts. It also, therefore, avoided issues that arise when students forget to bring paper-based resources with them to a session.

##### Outside of class

Outside of lectures and seminars, we made sure that many of the activities that students were asked to complete on Moodle could be done using mobile phones, not just laptop or desktop computers. These activities included:

- Recording and listening to podcasts
- Watching introductory videos for lectures and completing quizzes about these
- Posting questions on forums
- Completing timed-writing peer assessment tasks where students wrote by hand, photographed their work, and then uploaded their photographs.

#### FUTURE PLANS

For future iterations of this module, we plan to continue making all of the Moodle activities we design as mobile-friendly as possible. We also plan to continue incorporating mobile-based activities into lecture and seminar sessions. However, we are aware of the need to address the potentially distracting influence of technology in the classroom (Junco, 2012; Ravizza, Hambrick, & Fenn, 2014; Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013). To address this, one approach that we have experimented with already is "zoning" seminar classes into segments where mobile phones are or are not required. For segments where mobile phones are not required,

students are asked to place their phone somewhere out of sight, so they cannot see any flashing lights from instant messages being received. We plan to continue with this approach to examine its effectiveness over the coming year.

#### CONCLUSION

Overall, MAN001 has innovated in terms of delivery format, the use of educational technology and peer learning, and the embedding of language/study skills support to respond to the three global trends outlined at the start of this report. Feedback from students on the approach taken has been positive, as has feedback from colleagues who have observed teaching sessions. Given the global nature of the trends addressed, it seems likely that many other institutions will face similar challenges. With this on mind, we hope that this report of our experiences will be useful to higher education practitioners in other contexts. ◯

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