Approaches to Reform at the School of Economic Studies in Mongolia: A Synopsis

David Hall, Nikolai Lizunov and Harold Thomas

Abstract

The reform of economics education at the European Union of Economic Studies in the National University of Mongolia was the subject of a recent EU funded project. The initial focus of the project was on curriculum reform, but it became evident that those reforms would need to be accompanied by managerial reform. Aspects of both curriculum and managerial reform and the way in which they were inter-related are explored within the context of a country undergoing transition to a market economy.

Introduction

In 1996 the University of Manchester, in conjunction with CfBT (Centre for British Teachers), commenced a three year Technical Assistance to the Former Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) funded project designed “to adapt Mongolian higher economics education to the requirements of the free market economy” (Tacis, 1995). The project was based in the School of Economic Studies (formerly the Economics Institute) of the National University of Mongolia (NUM) in Ulaanbaatar. The specific objectives were that the School of Economic Studies (SES) should be:

- organised in such a manner as to reflect the demands of a market economy;
- the leading provider, in Mongolia, of training courses and materials at BSc and Master’s level adapted to the realities of the market economy; and
- capable of providing high level economic policy advice and contract research activities to the public and private sector that reflect the realities of the market economy (Tacis, 1995).

The initial focus of the project was on curriculum reform. It became apparent, however, during the first year of the project that curriculum reform would need to be supported by managerial reform on a scale which had not been envisaged at the time the project was devised (Hall et al., 1997). It is the purpose here to provide a synopsis of those curricula and managerial reforms within the context of the reform process in Mongolia.

School of Economic Studies: background

The School of Economic Studies (SES) was one of eight schools of the National University of Mongolia (NUM). The SES comprised some 1250 undergraduate students (950 full-time; 240 evening; 60 correspondence), 35 masters degree students and 80 full-time academic staff. Undergraduate students followed a four-year programme, including a common first year. There were eleven specialist programmes (Accounting, Statistics, Banking, Demography, Demography and Statistics, Economics, Information Science, Management, Marketing, Insurance and Tax). There was some cross-faculty teaching and some teaching given to SES students by staff in non-SES departments. In addition, some departments, particularly the English Language Support Centre, undertook teaching to students in other schools and institutes of the University. Staff contracts were governed by teaching hours that encouraged high contact time. Staff salaries were low which encouraged staff to undertake work outside the University.

The SES was headed by a Director appointed by the Rector of the University. The Director was assisted by two Deputy Directors (one as Head of Studies and the other as Head of Research). Each faculty had a Head appointed at the same time as the Director. Critical support staff amounted to the Director’s
secretary, a study officer primarily responsible for timetable and examination arrangements and a School accountant.

Income for the SES at the commencement of the project was derived primarily from government funding and from student fees. Following the elections of 1996 the new government substantially reduced its subvention to institutions with the intention that universities should be free to increase tuition fees payable by students.

**Curriculum Reform in the Mongolian Context**

 Whilst there may be common elements in curriculum reform programmes in education and training organisations throughout the world, the manner in which they are applied to the particular set of circumstances prevailing in any given location means that such programmes may vary widely, primarily because of the economic, political, social and cultural environment in which they are operating (Skilbeck, 1990). These may be evidenced at the local, regional or national level. In this case critical aspects of this environment included the following:

- reform measures had to be sensitive to current and future resource constraints if they were to be achievable and, more importantly, sustainable. So, for example, the reform of teaching methods requiring the distribution of large quantities of written materials to individual students at course lectures was not a viable option given recurrent costs associated with such a strategy;

- resource constraints found expression in shortages of learning materials, in particular a very low stock of Mongolian language based materials. One possible solution would have been to provide English Language based materials either for translation or for reading in the original. However, these texts are aimed primarily at a western audience in advanced market economies and consequently make assumptions about students’ prior conceptions of economic phenomena that do not readily translate to the Mongolian context. Moreover, despite the increasing understanding and use of English, the low level of English Language skills held by the vast majority of incoming students, most especially those arriving from rural areas, meant that the reading of texts in English was not a viable proposition;

- the prior formal learning experiences of SES students in the Mongolian school system provided few students with experience of independent learning. Consequently they were familiar with a style of learning which involved high levels of dependence upon their teachers. Moreover, many students joining the SES had had their schooling disrupted by the 1994 teachers’ strike and the closure of schools in winter months. Such disruption took place against a background of declining government expenditure (Wu, 1994);

- the transitional state of the Mongolian economy, with many economic sectors within which markets had not fully developed, had influenced students’ prior conceptions of economic phenomena. Students from rural areas in particular had partially developed conceptions about the development of markets (Hall, 1997);

- the motives and interests of SES lecturers were influenced to a considerable degree by their conditions of work, salaries, and length of working day. One notable aspect of the terms and conditions of employment was the link between numbers of hours taught and salary received.

**Curriculum Reform Activities**

 Consistent with the wider environmental conditions outlined above, curriculum reform at the SES sought to take account of the need to facilitate the intellectual progression of students. Activities focused upon five main areas:

- the structure of the undergraduate curriculum;

- the design of individual courses;

- the assessment of students;
the learning styles of students;

the development of learning materials.

It was intended that these areas should be mutually supportive to the extent that successful reform would require progress in each of the five areas. Each of these will be considered in turn.

**Structure**

Reform of the structure of the undergraduate curriculum required identification of common elements across the various specialist degree programmes and the establishment of a logical order for the teaching of the various course components. An important principle in this respect was establishing intellectual building blocks so that underpinning and more general knowledge, skills and understanding were acquired by students in the early years of the course and more specialist knowledge, skills and understanding in later years. In addition, the curriculum structure was reformed to enable students to understand and analyse the workings of a market economy. This aspect of the curriculum reform process was concerned with the content of courses, in particular establishing the concepts, theories and ideas which might enable students to grasp the fundamental aspects of the workings of a market economy. It led to the establishment of a common core of courses, including micro and macroeconomics, in first and second year programmes for all students studying for an undergraduate degree at the SES.

**Design**

To provide the basis for enhanced coherence and commonality between courses offered both within and between different degree programmes, the design of individual courses was addressed. This development required tutors to write their course designs to a common format with information on course content, lecture programme, assessment methods, timings of assessments and guidance for students on further reading / learning activities. This process increased the transparency of courses. Individual course designs enabled students to take more control over their own learning through the provision of a framework for independent learning. A further development in this area was to provide greater opportunities for students to reflect upon economics / business ideas, concepts and theories within the Mongolian context so as to make learning less abstracted from the world as students actually experienced and understood it.

**Assessment**

The development of the assessment system at the SES was based upon the principle of increasing the reliability of student assessments so that information about the academic development and abilities of individual students could be enhanced. Progress towards achieving this was made by moving away from almost total reliance upon oral examinations to greater use of written examinations, thus providing the basis of a more readily transparent system open to greater scrutiny. Developing a wider range of assessment methods, including multiple choice tests, problem solving questions and extended pieces of writing also allowed assessment methods to be chosen which better fitted the purpose for which they were being used and provided the potential for more reliable information about student progression.

**Learning Styles**

The emphasis in terms of developing the learning styles of students was to encourage greater independence of learning. A range of factors, not least a shortage of resources, contributed to the development of teaching methods and learning styles which made students highly dependent upon their lecturers in terms of their academic progress. ‘Whilst not seeking to sever the ties that can develop between lecturers and their students, there was an attempt to allow students to operate more independently by providing them with more information about their courses. Examples were the development of a student handbook, establishing an independent study centre, providing study skills courses to all incoming students and, as discussed below, creating independent study packs for students.

**Learning Materials**
Fundamental to the process of developing student independence in terms of their learning was the creation of independent study packs aimed at complementing established programmes of lectures and seminars. In total nineteen packs were created which provided students with a range of stimulus materials and self-study activities. All of these packs were scrutinised by a group of lecturers from the SES for a range of quality related features. In addition, the Independent Study Centre was stocked with a range of English Language texts that enabled SES students to develop both their English Language skills and subject specific knowledge and understanding.

Managerial Reform

Although, as outlined above, the primary focus of the TACIS funded project was on curriculum reform, one of the objectives of the project was that the SES should be “organised in such a manner as to reflect the demands of the market economy” (Tacis, 1995). This implied managerial reform to support curriculum developments. Eight main strands of activity were pursued, each of which will be considered in turn. These were aimed at encouraging:

- discussion of common issues;
- sharing of information;
- response to the new environment;
- interaction with the local community;
- establishment of priorities;
- clarification of responsibilities;
- flexibility in the use of resources;
- staff development and training.

Such an approach recognised the inter-dependency of a range of organisational variables, including the tasks to be performed, the skills, training, management and leadership of staff, the structure of the organisation and the technology available (Leavitt, 1965; Kochan and Useem, 1992; Nadler et al, 1992). It also recognised that these internal factors had to be related to the rapidly changing external economic, social and technological environments in which the School was operating (Scott Morton, 1992). It was fundamental to the reform process that these issues were accompanied by changes in the values and beliefs of staff (Mohrman and Lawler, 1993).

Discussion of common issues

Based upon the view that successful change relies on an approach which engenders common ownership of issues, it was recognised that the SES would need to develop structures which would encourage discussion and debate amongst staff and would give the opportunity for decision making which took account of a range of views. This was approached firstly by the establishment of a faculty structure. Eleven departments were brought together into three faculties and four support centres to encourage academic integration and discussion of issues that might cross departmental boundaries. Secondly, a committee structure was established at the School level. Four committees (Personnel, Teaching, Research and Consultancy, Planning and Resource Allocation) focused on the key issues that were emerging as critical to the reform process. Each had its own membership and terms of reference and reported to the School Board chaired by the Director.

Sharing of information
Linked to the need for common ownership of issues was a requirement for information to be made widely available. This was approached in three ways. First, the curriculum was codified. For instance, if a coherent degree programme were to be developed, fitting students to work within a market economy, it was important for staff to know what their colleagues were teaching. It was also important for students to know what each part of the course would contain and how many credits would attach to each component. Consequently a schedule of courses for each degree programme and a schedule of credit weightings for each course were produced. Second, procedures were documented. For instance, decisions taken at committees needed to be recorded; appointment and promotion criteria for staff needed to be clearly stated; and assessment methods for students made widely available. Third, modern technology was utilised. In particular internet access was installed, primarily to encourage teaching and research activities; a local area network was established for ease of internal communication; and appropriate software was installed to improve student record and financial management systems.

**Response to the new environment**

Historically, the primary role of staff had been teaching and this was reflected in their contracts of appointment. One of the objectives of curriculum reform was to shift the emphasis away from high contact time towards a culture of increased independent learning on the part of students. To be effective this required the provision of study material in Mongolian written by members of staff. As the leading university in Mongolia there was also a demand on staff to increase their research and consultancy output. These new demands had to be reflected in contracts of employment and in appointment and promotion criteria.

Because staff were employed by the National University rather than by the SES, however, changes affecting staff contracts had to be approved by the authorities of the NUM. In many areas of managerial change, as in curriculum change, the SES was being used as a pilot with the intention of later implementation throughout the University. In staffing matters, however, changes instigated by the SES were applied throughout the University, including the adoption of new terms and conditions of appointment for academic staff; new staff categories (Assistant Lecturer, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor, Outstanding Professor); new promotion procedures; new promotion criteria; and staff appraisal schemes.

**Interaction with the local community**

With the aim of being the leading economics institution in Mongolia, there was a requirement that the SES should be capable of providing high level economic policy advice and contract research activity to the public and private sectors. There was also a need to compensate for reduced state funding by becoming more entrepreneurial (Davies, 1987) in order to generate additional income earned from non-state sources. Consequently there was a requirement to market the School’s activities and to link the skills of the School with the needs of the community. To stimulate such activity a Research and Consultancy Centre was established. The purpose of the Centre was to coordinate the consultancy activities of the faculties and support centres.

**Establishment of priorities**

Given the magnitude of the changes that were taking place both within the SES and in the environment in which the School operated, it was necessary to establish priorities and targets for future development. This was undertaken through the establishment of a strategic plan. This process involved discussion between the senior management of the SES and staff at a faculty level. An essential component of the plan was that it brought together academic, financial, staffing and space considerations. The plan contained short, medium and long-term objectives against which the achievement of the School and its staff could be judged.

**Clarification of responsibilities**

Effective management requires a definition of areas of responsibility to establish authority and to avoid duplication of effort. To achieve this end, new job definitions were adopted for senior managerial staff.
These applied, for instance, to the Director, Deputy Director (Head of Studies), Deputy Director (Research) and to Heads of Faculty. In addition, support services were reorganised. The student record system, for example, was made the responsibility of a single person (the study officer) and a School Accountant was located within the School building.

Flexibility in the use of resources

The shift in emphasis away from high staff/student contact time towards the provision of study material implied the need for flexibility in the use of resources. This was necessary so that support could be given to the production of study materials and to improvement in library facilities. The reduction in government funding and the need to generate income through consultancies and short courses led to a demand to identify the extent to which faculties and support centres were attracting income and how that income compared with their expenditure. In order to assist in the decision making process new financial management approaches were developed. Each faculty and support centre was designated as a cost centre and an accounting model was devised which identified sources of income and expenditure and demonstrated the financial health of each faculty and support centre. The model utilised student load tables showing the distribution of teaching by faculty/support centre and income and expenditure figures showing the surplus/deficit for each faculty/support centre.

Staff development and training

All of the above strands of managerial reform were held together by a common theme. That theme was the need to encourage the training and development of academic and non-academic staff. As a commitment to that objective the SES adopted a staff development policy.

Conclusion

The curriculum and managerial reforms at the SES have all been consistent with the objectives of the project. The reforms provide the basis for further development within current resource constraints, but they represent only the beginning of a process of change. To be sustainable they will require the continuing efforts of the Director and staff at the SES and continuing support from the international community. Without further progress in key areas there is a danger that some of the gains of the project will be diminished. The next TACIS project aimed at administrative reform within the NUM as a whole provides opportunities for this further development.

References


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