

INDUSTRY INITIATED INTERNATIONALIZATION OR JTH GOES TO CHINA, A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

"Students should learn Chinese" was the trigger words from the industry "because 99% of all promotional materials sold in Sweden come from China". This seemed unrealistic at first, but eventually developed the idea that students should visit China to meet the business community in the East and what today is everyday life for many Western companies. This paper describes a project carried out during 2009 when about 30 students at the "Graphic Design and Web Development" programme at the School of Engineering, Jönköping University went to China to study for about five weeks. The goals of the project are to: create conditions to increase the employability of students, increase opportunities for active collaboration between students and industry, stimulate students' creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, and promote understanding and respect for other values, e.g. cultures and traditions. The students were given a long list of different tasks, one of them was to do a specific task for a Swedish company; finding new and interesting products that could be used as giveaways while others were asked to negotiate better prices from alternative providers. They worked in small groups of about three people and all groups had unique projects. The principals of the project were all wholesalers of promotional products. The result was a great success; all groups did present complete and precise calculations for their products and it is notable that the students after the trip have become both more discerning and more likely to continue their careers in an international environment. The percentage of students going abroad to study were much higher among them who participated in the China project than among them who didn't.

KEYWORDS

Internationalization, Industry involvement, China,

BACKGROUND

Even before the School of Engineering at Jönköping University (JTH) joined the CDIO Initiative, Industry Involvement and Internationalization was high priority when planning programmes. JTH has a target that 25% of the students will study abroad during or after their education, which is one of the highest rates in Sweden for programmes without compulsory

studies abroad. In addition to this objective a lot of effort is put into including other students in the outcome of internationalization efforts, including guest speakers, theme days and not least the integration of international students in regular courses. No student graduates from the School of Engineering without having read at least one course given in English.

Another cornerstone of JTH's policy is cooperation with the local industry. Already during the first year of the engineering programmes a course starts that extends over the first two years, where a significant part consists of visits to some of the region's businesses. Students do this in small groups and therefore they get to know their supervisors. Hopefully this gives the students an understanding of what will be required of them when they have completed their studies and begin their careers. It is also quite common for students doing their theses at the companies they have studied and it is not uncommon that students get their first job at these companies. JTH has traditionally focused on programmes at the Bachelor level (3-year programmes), so when the programme in Graphic design and Web development was planned to be only two years it was soon realized that the short time available made it difficult to follow the tried and tested model. Instead of having industrial involvement as a separate course it was chosen to integrate this into the regular courses. Already during the first semester a partnership was developed that includes a trade association for promotional companies (PWA). During their first year, students will work with a couple of PWA's member companies through various projects, such as manning of the exhibition booth at the annual promotional fair at Elmia, proposing booth design for PWA at the same fair, design proposals for promotional products and developing graphical profiles for the member companies.

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The project idea was simple: students were divided into groups and each group was assigned to a company within PWA. The task given was to come up with a product proposal for the company. The product should come from China and the students were expected to find the product/producer and do all the calculations for the entire chain from manufacturing in China to "ready to sale"-products in Sweden. How this was done is described below.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

China of today is one of the countries with the highest economic growth in the world and in China there is a new and exciting market with great potential for many industries. It is a country with a lot of knowledge to learn from, but we also have much to share. The outcomes of the project for students are to increase their own market value and become more attractive in the labour market, both for Swedish companies setting up in China and for Chinese companies who choose to start operations in the Western world.

In order to increase understanding and create conditions to interact with people from other countries and cultures students should get a glimpse of both etiquette in the business world and how it is to live in a country with completely different standards and conditions. As the project runs for quite a long period the students have time to establish contacts with industry, both nationally and internationally, and to make new friends that can come handy in the future. They approach and understand their future role of profession in a better way and get a broader perspective on themselves, their own knowledge and their professional context.

For JTH the purpose was to find new ways for co-production between public and private sectors both nationally and internationally. More and more of the daily work will be of a bi- or multinational nature so it's becoming increasingly important to provide students with an

international outlook. The purpose for JTH is also to broaden the concept of internationalization and spread the internationalization to those who choose not to go abroad for studies at all.

The goals of the project therefore are to:

- create conditions to increase the employability of students
- increase opportunities for active collaboration between students and industry
- stimulate students' creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, and promote understanding and respect for other values, e.g. cultures and traditions.

IMPLEMENTATION

The China project was carried out during the spring of 2009 and consisted of three phases: preparations at home, a five-week stay in China, and reporting and examination after the return to Sweden. The project was a 15 credits course, where students could choose whether they wanted to make a workplace based project in Sweden or participate in China project. About half of the students did choose to go to China. During the preparation phase, a series of lectures were given, designed to provide an understanding of Chinese history and culture. It also included a short series of lectures about the basics of the Chinese language. The aim was to prepare the students that they might experience China as very, very different and also to make them aware of the risk of excessive cultural clashes.

To complement the theoretical parts the students were assigned a real task by their host companies. To solve the task and get a deeper knowledge in the field the students started and ran a fictitious company. Within the company, the students were supposed to:

- find and connect with potential subcontractors
- assess those suppliers in terms of quality, delivery and production
- deliver results to their clients and recommend appropriate subcontractors
- create an administrative system with web interface for time reporting and management of the project
- create a professional magazine with articles and photos, written and taken along the project
- create a video documentary about the trip, which has "young entrepreneurs who want to expand in China" as the target group
- create an archive of photos taken during the trip and do a photo exhibition
- design logo and visual identity for their "business"

The students travelled in small groups according to their own planning to Shanghai, where the whole group gathered at a particular place at a set time. All showed up, nice and clean, and phase two could begin.

The first days were spent in Shanghai, with a number of lectures given by Swedes who have lived some time in Shanghai, employees by Swedish companies and representatives from the Swedish Trade Council in Shanghai. After the days in Shanghai, the students travelled to Ningbo, a small city south of Shanghai. Little should be read in Chinese - Ningbo has about six million inhabitants. In Ningbo the students were accommodated at Zhejiang Wanli University, which has about 20 000 students. During the three weeks lectures, field trips and individual work were mixed with the intense social contact with Chinese student, following living on a Chinese campus.

The highlight of the visit was a two-day visit to Yiwu known as "the exhibition city", where over 30 000 companies exhibit at a permanent exhibition that each year is visited by more than 2 million people. Exhibitors are manufacturing companies and here you can find more or less "everything". There is also help available to find the right freight and customs costs for

the whole world. Here, the students had every opportunity to find products that could fit their clients at home in Sweden.

Home at last, final stage began which meant to bring order to all impressions and sort all the collected materials. All work was reported to the School of Engineering in both oral and written form. To the external clients results were reported in the form of a written report and a presentation at the company. Most groups had handled their planning well delivered everything in good time. Other groups learned about the importance of good planning and had to work around the clock a few days.

RESULTS

The students worked in small groups of about three people and all groups had unique projects. The principals of the project were all wholesalers of promotional products. Some of the groups had the task of finding new and interesting products that could be used as giveaways while others were asked to negotiate better prices from alternative providers. The more precise demands made by their principal, the better were results from the students. One group had as task to find new gift boxes for chocolates. At the fair there were an entire department with that type of articles and the students could move from booth to booth and gather samples to take home to the principal company back in Sweden. Another group got the assignment from their PWA company to negotiate better prices for their product. This was obviously a much harder task. A third group were asked to find a supplier of 10 000 printed balloons to push a company name. All groups were able to present a result to their respective PWA-business, although the quality varied. This was mostly due to the difficulty of some of the tasks.

A major problem that students were aware of but not adequately prepared for was that most of the exhibitors at Yiwu, were strictly Chinese-speaking and just a few spoke some kind of broken English. This language confusion of course made it difficult to negotiate prices. Another problem was that the exhibitors were not particularly interested of quantities as small as 10 000 balloons, they would have preferred it to be at least 100 000. However, that was also an experience.

All groups did present complete and precise calculations for their products including; purchase price, customs and other import charges that might have to be added before the goods is safe in a ware-house in Sweden. It turned out to be quite an interesting and demanding task to cross the language and culture barrier and come to an understanding with skilled Chinese business men and it led to lots of frustration among the students. But for them who made it, it gave both confidence and insight about themselves that they were capable of handling completely new and difficult situations. We have noted that the students after the trip have become both more discerning and more likely to continue their careers in an international environment. The percentage of students going abroad to study were much higher among them who participated in the China project than among them who did choose to stay in Sweden for internship. In their application for studying abroad many of them stated that they had been inspired during the China event. To live five weeks in a country very much different from what they are used to seem to have made them both far-sighted and self-conscious.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The project was successful in all aspects. Students experienced the period as highly instructive and interesting, and interviews with some of the groups revealed that the project objectives were met more than enough. The project provided an opportunity for students who were not used to international travel to "try out" study abroad in a more organized form. The project also has increased the students' interest for international studies as well as to work abroad. Whether the students are more attractive on the job market or not is yet too early to measure, but with greater confidence and with a CV that includes a five weeks project in China we feel fairly confident that this is the case.

The most obvious problem the students experienced and not were prepared for was that the representatives of companies in China were not knowledgeable in the English language, impeding negotiations. Another problem was that before the trip, the students had met their clients (companies) at only a few occasions. The result would have been even better if the students had been able to do a shorter period of internship at the company before the trip to learn more about the company's business and culture. It is very important that businesses are aware of the assignments they give to students, and that they take their responsibility to inform clearly what they expect. The students are inexperienced in the area and need much guidance.

For JTH's part, the project has led to a new way to interact with industry and this collaborative form could be used for other programmes and with other industry partners. It can be seen as an asset, both from a marketing standpoint and in terms of internationalization. We can see great development potential with this type of projects. The profile the education and training of the Graphic design and web development programme has can allow the students to cooperate with Chinese companies in a variety of ways. For coming years we see a development towards delivering more and more services to Chinese companies, as China goes from being one of the largest exporters of goods to one of the worlds largest importer of services as well as complex products and systems.

Biographical Information

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