

Work From Anywhere: Diary of an Edupreneur

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In managing the delivery of VCE offshore, I had to undertake a fairly constant routine of travel and therefore develop a 'Work From Anywhere' mentality. To those of you who are in the same position, you will understand that while we think time changes and cultural differences are the major issues to be confronted, and they certainly are challenging, the major enemy of those who work on the road is the Chief Financial Officer of the organization for which you work. He (or she) will be constantly trying to cut costs by removing the elements essential to travel such as business class tickets and squeezing as much 'work' into the travelling time as possible. This masks his or her belief that anyone 'working' overseas is actually spending their time sightseeing and eating and drinking in exotic locations.

The CFO decided that it would be a more productive use of my time if we combined two activities which involved overseas travel, albeit in two different countries a couple of thousand miles apart. Managing the Victorian Certificate of Education offshore involved assisting the Department of Education officials in auditing the exams conducted overseas. Normally, I arrived a day or two early to make sure that everything was well prepared, and the Chinese invigilators knew exactly what to do. The DET officials had decided to audit the English exam which was on a Wednesday at one school and the Maths exam on the following Monday at a different school in a different part of China. This also happens to be the day before the Melbourne Cup holiday and unfortunately, it means the officials have to spend four days in China followed by a day off for them as public servants. They later remind me often that this was a great 'sacrifice' on their part.

At the same time, my school applying to the Department for a partnership with a new school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Application to partner with an offshore school runs to about 350 pages and has to be submitted seven days in advance of the meeting with a panel of Education Department International Panel bureaucrats. This gives them time not read the application so they can ask irrelevant questions during the meeting. Despite this, it has to be delivered on time or the application will not proceed. This meeting will take place on the Wednesday of the week after I return, so the documents are due for submission on the Wednesday after the Melbourne Cup. While much of the application can be prepared in advance, due diligence means I have to visit the school and attest to the fact that they have the facilities and personnel to run the VCE. This has to be documented and photographs supplied. So, the CFO has decided that in between the first and second exam audits, I can fly to Sri Lanka, complete the due diligence, get the agreement with the new school signed and submit the documents to the Panel secretary before the due date. Then return to China and attend the second audit. "You will have plenty of time", the CFO says with a grin and just the vaguest hint of sarcasm. "You've done this stuff before."

China Southern Lounge, 10.00 pm Melbourne, Monday. Having threatened the CFO a work cover claim about potential blood clots and other assorted ailments, he has allowed me to fly business class as long as I work the day of leaving and travel overnight (saving a hotel room). But on the shorter five-hour flight from China to Sri Lanka its economy, as I “wouldn’t have enough time to get a good sleep anyway”. His logic is irrefutable.

China Southern Lounge Guangzhou Airport. 5.00am Tuesday. This is like a second home. As the major hub for China Southern I have been through here numerous times. Well rested, I go to the business class lounge for breakfast and fire up my laptop. Usual run of pointless messages. Confirmation from VCAA officials that we will meet later this evening prior to exam tomorrow morning.

Suzhou International Foreign Language School. 2.00pm Tuesday. Arrived Suzhou on time. Got to school for lunch with Principal. Presented him with a gift of Penfolds wine which he put in his bag and proceeded to order several bottles of the local Chateau Great Wall red, which the staff at lunch downed with gay abandon.

Now with the exam invigilators, slightly worse for wear. They are missing a few documents which I download and print off. After a few adjustments we are good to go, everything is set up correctly.

Fairmont Suzhou Hotel. The lounge 7.00pm. Tuesday Meet VCAA officials. They inform me, with a certain amount of smugness, that there is a new form I have to fill out and I can access through a link to a Google shared drive they have set up. When I inform them that the Chinese government has banned all things Google, they hastily open their laptops and find they can’t access it themselves. They look at each other. I buy them a drink.

Suzhou International Foreign Language School., 4.30am, Wednesday – English exam. It is VCAA policy that exams done offshore must be done at the same time as those in Victoria. The three-hour time difference means the English exam starts at 6.00am in China, which means a 5.00am arrival at the school, which means a 4.00am start for those involved. The audit officials are bleary-eyed, cold and hungry. The five-star hotel they are staying at doesn’t serve breakfast until 6.30am and they will not get back in time to have any. I give them a pork bun each.

Suzhou International Foreign Language School, 9.30am, Wednesday – English exam complete. Preparations paid off, and I can tick that box off. Audit officials look pale. Between the two of them they are discussing how to get overtime for the early start. I tell them I am leaving for Sri Lanka to visit another school and I will see them on Monday. They look somewhat startled but then tell me they had hoped I would help them visit pandas. I explain that the pandas are in another province, Sichuan, which is several hours away by train.

“Do you have any contacts in Sichuan?”

“Well, we do have a school in Chongqing that has just started the VCE program”

“That’s great. Tell them we are coming to visit them.”

“They are not expecting you. They will get nervous.”

“Purely meet and greet, no pressure. And could you ask them to organize a panda tour”

“OK”

After a lengthy phone call soothing the nerves VCE Co-ordinator at Chongqing, we agree to a short school visit and then they will organize a visit the two Panda Parks near Chongqing.”

China Southern Lounge Guangzhou Airport. 5.00pm Wednesday. Email school to let them know all went well and of the VCAA's interest in Chinese wildlife. I receive an email from the Secretary of the International panel reminding me that all the documentation needs to be sent by the following Wednesday. The following Tuesday is Melbourne Cup Day, so no VCE exams. It gives me a buffer of one day to finalize the application.

Metropole Hotel Colombo 11.00pm Wednesday. Arrived Sri Lanka and met by our local agent. All going well. The hotel he has booked for me is eerily identical to one I have stayed in Dubai, the Al Bustan. The layout is the identical, the 'services' equally disappointing and the designation four-star is highly optimistic. The one difference is the air conditioning, which is not working, so I sit at my computer wearing as little as possible and check my documents for the next day. After a few hours' fitful sleep, I wake and think I am in Dubai.

Metropole Hotel Colombo 6.30am Wednesday. I pride myself on being able to eat the food of most cultures. The one thing I cannot eat is chili. Sri Lankan cuisine seems to be based entirely around chilies and I thank God for British colonialism which allows me to have jam and toast with a cup of tea for breakfast.

Principal's Office, St. Daniel's School, Colombo 10.00am Wednesday. The Principal indicates that he will not sign the agreement I have brought with me. I have just spent the last hour photographing classrooms and interviewing staff to complete the application. It is clear that he simply wants to rent out his classrooms and staff during the afternoons when his own students have gone home. This is not the type of school-to-school to partnership that International Panel will approve. Many hours of work are now useless.

Unnamed Café, Colombo, 11.30 am Wednesday. After telling me that the encounter with the Principal was a 'spot of bad luck', the agent and I make a shared phone call to my manager back at the Melbourne school explaining the situation. The agent says he knows some other schools that might be interested and that we should visit them. My manager, fearful of confronting the CFO, agrees and urges me to do everything possible to get a school on board, reminding me that she has spent two years getting approval for this project.

Principal's Office, St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, 4.00pm Wednesday. This is the third school we have visited. We have been fobbed off by the Secretary of one school, listened to but ignored by another. However, this Principal listens intently and is interested. She would like to proceed but needs to me to do presentation to her Board. She phones the members, but they cannot meet until Friday. Things are looking good.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 6.00pm Wednesday. The air conditioning is now working, and the room temperature is 13C. Fortunately, I have winter clothing from China, so I sit at my computer wearing as much as possible however, while the AC is back the Wi-Fi is gone. I ask the Concierge if there is a McDonald's nearby. Yes, there is. My heart leaps as I get into the local 'taxi'.

McDonald's Colombo Four Square Mall, 6.30pm Wednesday. Great Wi-fi, good temperature and a big TV. They are having a special McNormal Burger, which for a limited time means you can get a burger without chili. I seriously contemplate staying here overnight. I access my drive in Melbourne and download material for the presentation. I also have to work on a new agreement, send it back for signatures and get it returned. It will be tight but if the Board is 'on board', it is doable. I get a text message from our local agent asking me if I would like to go to a

Whiskey Bar. I decline but tell him I need to spend some time at the school collecting the information for the 'revised' application.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 11.30pm Wednesday. Wearing a hoodie and track pants, I send the revised Agreement back to Melbourne and climb into bed.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 6.00am Thursday. Tea and toast.

St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, 8.00am Thursday. Tradition is very important in Sri Lanka. St. Anne's was used as a hospital in World War II and they have kept all the furniture including the school desks from that time, which the girls sit on to this day. They have also kept the large jars full of the fetuses of many animals and one or two humans. The photos I take strategically omit these details.

St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, 4.00pm Thursday. I have collected all the material and information I need to revise the Application.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 5.00pm Thursday. Air conditioning out.

McDonald's Colombo Four Square Mall, 5.30pm Thursday. I receive the new Agreement to be signed and settle in to complete the presentation for the next day. One McNormal meal please. Things are still on track.

St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, 8.00am Friday. Tradition is very important in Sri Lanka. The school has one of what must be one of the earliest production photocopiers. She presses several buttons, and the machine starts to shake and produce a screeching like a 747 heading down the runway. As she prints, the machine produces strange guttural screeches precede each page. After a page is produced there is a deep hissing sigh. At this point I understand how the machine feels.

St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, 10.00am Friday. The Principal and four Anglican Ministers in religious attire face me in a room. Since there is no projection equipment they are crowded around my laptop. As the presentation proceeds there is no discernible reaction until I get to the budget. As I explain that they will be free to charge what they like, silent glances shoot between them. After I finish there are some questions, but none that seem negative. One of the Ministers thanks me and say they need to pray on the matter.

St. Anne's Anglican Girls' College, [Principal's Office] 11.00am Friday. With the agent, I explain to the Principal, the timeline I have. The particular issue is that the Agreement between schools is a critical part of the Application to run VCE offshore. She is very understanding and says she believes it will go ahead. I suggest leaving the signature page, which already has the required signatures from my school, with her and when the Board says yes, she can sign the page and send a copy to me. She agrees and will meet them after Church on Sunday.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 12.00 noon Friday. Having successfully fended off the agent's desire to treat me to a traditional Sri Lankan meal, I find the hotel room temperature is quite pleasant. It is in these quiet times, the edupreneur might be tempted in some self-reflection. This should be

avoided at all costs. Questions like, “How did I get here?”, “What am I doing?”, “Am I in some bizarre nightmare?” serve no purpose and can only lead to madness. Instead, for the twentieth time I recalculate the timeline for getting the work done. It’s getting tight, but still doable.

Metropole Hotel Colombo, 3.00pm Friday. I wake up shivering as the AC has gone into overdrive. Email school to let them know the situation. It is 8.00pm Friday night in Melbourne so I don’t expect an immediate answer.

The Boomerang Bar, Downtown Colombo 9.00pm Friday.

“Look, mate. I don’t want to buy a piece of beachfront property, I don’t want a genuine Rolex watch and, while I am sure she as beautiful as you say, I don’t want to meet your sister.”

Colombo Airport, Starbucks, 7.00pm Saturday. Preparing the Application is a time-consuming process. I have been making changes across the whole 350 pages, replacing all references and information about St. Daniel’s with those relating to St. Anne’s. I am getting there. No word from my school yet. Email to Nanjing School arranging to meet them Sunday afternoon to prepare for exam.

China Southern Lounge Guangzhou Airport. 5.00am Sunday. I feel like I have come back home. Suddenly it is announced that all airspace has been closed for five hours for military exercises. No problem. I will still get to Nanjing today and in the meantime, I can keep working in a comfortable place. Email from my supervisor has a slightly frantic tone. I reply we can only wait.

Nanjing Sheraton 9.00pm Sunday. After a day of repeated delays, I finally get to Nanjing. Have had to cancel meeting with exam supervisors but I am assured they are all Ok. I have left messages with VCAA officials reminding them of the time and location. Done everything I can. No word from Sri Lanka.

Nanjing Jia Din International High School. Monday, 7.30am

“Hi, Mark, what happened to you?”

“We had an accident at the Panda Park”

“Where’s Margaret?”

“She’s flown back to Melbourne.”

“What! Is she OK? Are you Ok? That bandage on your head looks serious. What happened?”

“Well, the Chongqing people took us to two Panda parks. At the first one we couldn’t see anything. They were asleep or something. So, at the second park, Margaret was determined to see them and get some photos. Honestly, they have no idea about Health and Safety here! So, she was leaning over the fence to get a good shot and the fence gave way. She fell into a water ditch and I slid down a concrete wall. The ditch smelt of panda poo and she got worried about getting an infection. The Chongqing people were great, they got the school nurse to come and help us and she bandaged me up. They wanted to take Margaret to a local hospital, but she refused to go and got the next flight out. I think she was pretty traumatized.”

“Yeah, well Margaret it bit bigger than your average Chinese, so I guess the fence wasn’t designed for someone of her... dimensions. What about this exam then? It starts in an hour and a half.”

“How do I look?”

“Oh, not too bad. The grazes on your face are hardly noticeable at all.”

“I’m here now. I’m representing the Victorian Government and we will get the job done.”

Nanjing Jia Din International High School. Monday, 8.00am. Wounded VCAA official and I are taken to the exam venue, the school library. The Chief exam supervisor is there. She is dressed like a cross between the lead singer of KISS and Captain Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. There is little time to speak to her before the students start to file in. Also, the school officials have decided that the library will stay open while the exam is going on, instructing all other library visitors to remain quiet. I tell the VCE Co-ordinator that this is not acceptable, the library must be shut. She leaves to try and get the necessary permissions.

Meanwhile, the Chief Supervisor, who has chosen to go by the English name of “Candy” starts reading the instruction script from the Handbook. However, she decides to add her own messages, poetry and quotes from Confucius. A look of disbelief and horror appears, under the bandages, on Mark’s face. He stands at the doorway which is enough scare away students. The exam starts, but as Candy walks around, the chains clink against the studs on her clothes and the early morning sun coming in through the window bounces off the many pieces of glass and chrome she is wearing sending patterns bouncing across the exam papers the students are reading.

With the library secured, Mark retreats to a chair at the back of the room. Fortunately, this exam is only 90 minutes. After the students have left and the papers packed for shipping to Australia, we have a “review”. Candy, who seems quite happy with her supervisory performance, Mark and I sit together.

“Tom, I can’t sign off on this. Candy, did you do any training?”

“When?”

“At anytime.”

“Now?”

“Let me answer. We supervised Candy and all the staff doing the online courses that the VCAA provides.”

“Candy, you did online course from VCAA?”

“When?”

“At anytime.”

“Candy did the course in August.”

“I find that difficult to digest, given what I have seen here today. Candy, the library was open while the exam was on.”

“Yes”

“It must be closed.”

“When?”

After several minutes of this discussion, it is clear the ‘training’ did not specifically mention having a room that is closed to all other students or does it cover the type of clothing a supervisor should wear. The Chief Supervisor displays an air of self-satisfaction. To my horror, Mark says he has to stay and watch the next exam on Wednesday morning and that tomorrow, Tuesday, Melbourne Cup Day, my buffer, we will give the supervisors some proper training.

Golden Dragon Restaurant, Nanjing Monday, 6.30pm. It would be extremely impolite to refuse a dinner invitation from the Principal. I told Mark he needs to attend, because he represents the Victorian Government, and so we find ourselves around the table with various staff including the

Chief Supervisor, who is dressed to in what is best described as a “tiger theme”. Because of his antibiotics, Mark cannot drink, I refrain because I have work to do, but the rest of the table enjoy the hospitality to its fullest.

Nanjing Jia Din International High School. Tuesday, 11.00am. Mark remains faithful to the values of the public service which is to make even the simplest procedure complex and mind-numbingly boring. The supervisors sit through it dutifully, the Chief Supervisor dressed in bright red tracksuit with gold shoulder braids and belt. I ask the VCE Co-ordinator to have a chat to her about dress code for exams.

Nanjing Jia Din International High School. Tuesday, 2.00pm. Stayed behind to explain the procedure to the supervisors in a way they could understand and set up the room for the examination.

Nanjing Sheraton 5.00pm Tuesday. The window for delivery of Sri Lankan documents is closing. I call the agent. He informs me that the Bishop, a board member, went to visit his sister in the country and can't be contacted. His office said he will be back later today. I remind him of time differences that we have to have everything in by 5.00pm Wednesday Melbourne time.

Nanjing Sheraton 5.00am Wednesday. Email from my supervisor saying it was an exciting Melbourne Cup, she had a barbecue and won the sweep. Also, if we don't land the Sri Lanka project it does not bode well for us, meaning in reality me. Nothing from Sri Lanka.

Nanjing Jia Din International High School. Wednesday, 8.00am. The Chief Supervisor arrives looking like a member of the cast of the Matrix. Black leather coat, black clothes and hair tied back. Mark is satisfied and the exam runs smoothly. He signs off and I say goodbye and dash to the airport.

Nanjing Airport Lounge, Wednesday, 12.00 noon. On my phone I receive a photograph of signed signature page of the Agreement. I have to email the photo to myself and then using my highly developed Photoshop skills, make it look like the rest of the document. My plane leaves at 2.10pm, 10 minutes after close of business Melbourne time. I have difficulty completing this, due to sweaty palms and faltering mental capacity. However, at 1.15, I insert the page into the Agreement and the Agreement into the Application. I attach it to an email and press send. “Attachment exceeds acceptable limit” jumps onto the screen. Holding back my nausea, I break into three sections and send each separately, explaining why. They go through. I run to catch the flight.

China Southern, CZ 321, Somewhere over the South China Sea.

“Sir, would you like something to drink?”

“Yes, a glass of shiraz, thanks”

My desk at work, Thursday 9.00am

CFO - “Tom, how did you get on?”

Me – “All done, no problem.”

I receive an email from the International Panel thanking me for the documents and informing me that the meeting has been postponed for a week and I have five days to submit any additional material.

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