

VCE in China: A Case Study

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This paper is a study of the response of a transnational secondary program to COVID-19 and the need to adopt and adapt an online learning methodology.

Context

As Head of Transnational Education at a Victorian secondary school, I am responsible for the delivery of the Victorian Certificate of Education offshore in seven schools across China. This is a secondary school program over the last two and a half years of high school program consisting of a one-semester Gateway program followed by Years 11 and 12 and the VCE examinations at the end of Year 12. Subjects, typically English but in some cases Mathematics and Physics, are taught by a combination of “foreign” teachers from countries other than China predominantly by Chinese teachers with good English language skills. It is the normal secondary setting with teachers and students attending a number of classes across the school day. Mentors based in Melbourne who work predominantly online with teachers support these teachers. As other authors (Whateley¹, Mienczakowski², Chanda³, 2021) note online learning has been available in higher education in a variety of forms, however, because of the duty of care and supervisory responsibilities of secondary education, it has only ever been an ancillary function, used in the ever increasing administrative requirements of schooling.

Early Days

The Lunar New Year Festival in January 2020 saw Chinese and Foreign teachers and students travel domestically and internationally. A virus producing flu-like symptoms had appeared in Wuhan and began appearing all over China. As COVID-19 spread, the Chinese lockdown was swift and total. Schools were told quite quickly that they would not be opening at the end of this holiday. Foreign teachers found themselves trapped in their home countries from Jamaica to Poland. Chinese teachers and students were locked into their apartments. We were committed to continuing the VCE program that parents had paid for, so here in Melbourne, we were confronted with having to deliver a “classroom experience” online. And we had a week to do it. This issue was not unique that Rowland⁴ (2021) notes, “as the closure of the educational learning providers happened around the world the need to learn via the internet and other technologies and the question of best delivery was fast tracked.”

There were a number of constraints to negotiate. First, Chinese students do not use laptops but smartphones instead. This was an advantage as not every apartment in

¹ <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2760/alternate-delivery-modes-for-international-students.pdf>

² <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2759/future-experience.pdf>

³ <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2695/the-efficacy-of-online-studies.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2761/impact-of-coronavirus.pdf>

China has good quality internet access and phone access is generally quite good. This was a disadvantage in that lessons and interaction had to be geared towards a small screen environment. A classroom became 30 separate bedrooms across each city where the program operated. The software platform had to be one, which operated as a smartphone app for the receiver, and a laptop based program for the teacher. Also, China has a system of extensive filters on incoming internet data. The “Great Firewall of China” and its banning of all Google products limited the choices. The nature of secondary education and the pedagogy of the VCE are built around an interactive, collaborative view of education and this had to be preserved as far as possible. For example, an assessment task is an oral presentation to the class. Our delivery mode and software choice had to accommodate this and we were delivering to over 500 students.

Our agent and partner in the offshore project, Mr. Gary Li, has the offices of his AIDE Education group company in Collins Street, Melbourne. He offered his premises and support - so quite quickly we established two rooms as “studios” from which we could operate as virtual classrooms. Along with a camera, microphone and high speed internet connection each room had a whiteboard to allow teachers to operate in a familiar environment. The central location meant that teaching staff who lived all over Melbourne could easily travel to these studios. Gary also assisted in getting the “ClassIn” software, a Chinese platform that allowed us to avoid issues with communicating in China. Staff from AIDE conducted training in the program for teachers in using the platform and online teaching began in early March and continued for 14 weeks until the Chinese summer break.

Expanding Horizons

While teaching is the core component of the program, other aspects had become integral to its operation. An annual conference has been held every year over the last decade and has grown in stature and significance over the years, attracting politicians and academics from Australia and China. Typically, all teachers, mentors and senior leadership met in a different Chinese city each year. Day one was spent listening to keynote speakers and engaging with expert panel discussions. Days two and three involved all teachers in particular subject areas to plan, share resources and strategies. There are also social events that reinforce existing relationships and build new ones.

The planning group having realized that the Conference would have to be virtual, decided to try and preserve as much of its structure as possible. By chance, the Conference fell in between lockdowns and there would be an opportunity for limited gatherings at venues in both countries. RMIT donated its Storey Hall for use in Melbourne, while the Chinese gathered at a hotel in Shanghai. This required more sophisticated technology and each venue was set up with a large cinema-sized video screen, multiple cameras, microphones and a control panel able to manage the different media being used, including live interpreting in two languages. The opening day included a recorded message from the Victorian Minister for Education, James Merlino, who had previously attended the conference in China, live keynote addresses from Victorian Government Business Office Commissioner in Shanghai and Minister Counsellor for Education, Brooke Hartigan, from the Australian Embassy in Beijing and Chinese educational academics. Perhaps the most arresting innovation was a panel discussion with four participants in Melbourne and two in Shanghai. The cameras synchronized the visuals so each venue saw six participants on stage. Another interesting aspect was a “Drinks Party” held at the end of the day to honor the tradition of the Conference dinners. Participants in both venues enjoyed food and drink and shared COVID-19 “war stories” across the big screen.

The following two days were devoted to online planning and resource sessions. A particular interest of the Chinese teachers was observing a demonstration class by exemplary teachers. The electronic format allowed for a new approach to this component. An English class by an excellent teacher in Melbourne was recorded. Through editing, various sections of the class were separated and the pedagogical techniques were highlighted and Chinese subtitles were added. The video was shown to teachers with mentors online to answer questions and add live comments to the session. The feedback about this was extremely positive.

Quality Assurance

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority is the government body that oversees the conduct of the VCE and has regulatory requirements, particularly around assessment. As Rowland⁵ (2021) rightly observes, the “seriousness of the integrity of their exams can also be questioned as the temptation to cheat ... can, under pressure, be seen as an easy option”. Exam supervisors represent the frontline that guarantees the integrity of the exam processes. Supervisor training, which has been a face to face exercise conducted annually by the Melbourne school staff and VCAA representatives normally travel to China to audit exam processes, observing and reporting on the supervisors.

Online training in this case needed to have a live interface section as well as content that supervisor staff could refer to as needed. Using the VCAA manual, a step-by-step recording of the complete supervision process from the arrival of the exam materials at the school until they are handed to the courier for return to Australia. In this case, the content was the major element so a mock exam was created and video recorded. Chinese sub-titles were incorporated and an “index” showing at what time-point in the video various sections were. This made later referencing much easier. Initially, an online meeting with all supervisors and school staff in Melbourne was arranged and the video was watched together. This gave the supervisors the chance to ask questions. From there, the Chinese supervisors could keep the video with them even as they worked through the actual preparation and supervision process. To date there have been no reported instances of cheating nor do the statistical analyses of result by VCAA indicate any anomalous grades. So it is possible to say that this method of training has been successful.

The three experiences described here illustrate the adaptability of the online model.

The first that sought to mirror the face-to-face experience worked within its limits. The challenge here is to sustain student engagement over extended periods and match the social benefits that accompany schooling however, the extensive online “life” of modern students has helped with this.

The second model of a 50/50 hybrid model was very successful and the benefits of this format will be incorporated into future conferences, even if they are once again have a large physical gathering of people.

The third model shows the advantages of online training and could prove to be superior in cost and effectiveness for highly specific and targeted education.

Online teaching and learning offers opportunities as an important tool in modern education at all levels. The experiences of the last eighteen months have tested all

⁵ <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2761/impact-of-coronavirus.pdf>

those involved and shown the adaptability of organizations and individuals. History demonstrates that large-scale health crises of the past have produced social change. It will be interesting to observe the changes that take place because of this moment in history.



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