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Establishing a Center for Language Education in a Chinese University: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, more degree programs worldwide are being taught through the medium of English, meaning that learners, most of whom are non-specialist language learners, need to demonstrate a high level of English language competence. As a consequence, foreign language provision in higher education has seen a mushrooming of language centers. Nowhere is this more the case than in China, which in recent years has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of new universities being established, together with associated language centers. This article explores the process of establishing a language center at a Chinese university, from the viewpoints of the teachers and students directly affected as a result. The article describes the shift from teacher-led classes to learners taking responsibility for their own learning. To accommodate this shift, professional development of teachers was and remains key to planning for expansion and growth of the center. Teaching quality and a student-centered atmosphere are the main drivers of the center. Staff and student feedback is used to illustrate how planning to serve the diverse needs of university populations is crucial, given that further development is likely to happen at a dizzying pace.

Keywords: *Language Center, China, University*

Introduction

The rapid internationalization of the world today has effectively meant that English has become not just a language of communication, but a global lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2011). English can be a gateway to success for many of its users, and, in a similar way, a barrier to success for those

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who do not possess proficiency in the language, by limiting their access to educational and professional opportunities.

The perceived link between being taken seriously on the global stage and the English language is a strand of discourse that has gained traction in contemporary China (Bolton & Graddol, 2012), which has resulted in increased emphasis on English language learning at Chinese universities.In2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) stipulated as one of its twelve main guidelines that within three years, not only should English as a medium of instruction be used for between five and ten percent of undergraduate specialisation courses at top-tier universities (MOE 2001), but that the number of such programmes offered by a higher education institution would form part of the institution's evaluation (Hu & McKay, 2012).The English language was identified as a strategic force for the social, economic and cultural development of the state.

This case study describes the establishment of a Center for Language Education (CLE) at a university of science and technology in southern China. It presents the strategies to involve the staff and students within the newly-developed structure. As a baseline study and initial needs analysis were carried out with the help of external experts at a partner university in the US, the study concentrates especially on the description of making the vision of university leadership a functioning pedagogical reality. Issues, needs and solutions were identified by university leadership, concerning the structure of the Center and the scale of organizational change it represented (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

The goal of the CLE was quite practical - determining how to structure a Center for Language Education and courses so as to satisfy in the best possible manner the needs and requirements of students and staff. The main challenge was to develop English language proficiency while simultaneously learning academic content in English, to adequately prepare students and teachers for what lay ahead, while at the same time trying to find ways to develop their potential. Staff and students were seen as mainly eager to take up the challenge. The views of the CLE's staff and students were actively sought as the CLE was co-constructed, with the resulting feedback forming part of the recommendations to university leadership regarding the Center's next steps towards sustainable development.

Literature Review

The learning of English at school has led to the increasing prominence of the language for the career and educational success of many millions of Chinese students. The importance of English in education can be seen in the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam (or gaokao), which tests students in the following three subjects: Chinese language (Mandarin), Maths and English.

Role and Function of Language Centers

The structure and organisation of language centers in higher education tend to reflect the context in which they have evolved. Faced with increased demand for language services, universities

have identified and implemented a range of responses to this need. Generally speaking, a language center should provide a range of language education for non-specialist students, or students not specialising in linguistic studies. A large number of further and higher education colleges in Europe have for some time listed a 'language center' as a central academic unit within their institutions (Ruane, 2003).China has seemingly followed suit. The function of language centers is becoming more interdisciplinary, ranging from academic to applied, or practical. This is responding to the profile of learners, who have diverse educational experiences and linguistic abilities, as well as varied motivations for learning English(Lu & Throssell, 2018).

Meeting students' range of different needs creates both programmatic and pedagogical challenges, yet also creates opportunities. For example, widespread access to the internet has led to an increase in online resources. Although some believe this begs the question whether physical language centers are necessary any longer (Robinson, 2018),language centers can remain focal points of university education if they are adaptable enough to support a range of teaching and research functions, work with all faculties of the university and thus contribute to academic life(Agai-Lochi, 2015).

English as a Medium of Instruction

English as a medium of instruction is a seemingly ever-growing global phenomenon. Nowhere is this trend more visible than in higher education (Earls, 2016; Lasagabaster et al., 2014; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014; Fenton Smith et al., 2017). Universities, rushing to internationalise and thereby make their institutions appear more prestigious (Knight, 2013), are offering increasing numbers of programs in English.

Such rapid advances in the field of English as a medium of instruction have been mainly top-down in nature, with faculty and students rarely consulted by policy makers at either the national or institutional level (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). Although a study in China (Hu et al., 2014), found that faculty views aligned with those of university management, believing that English as a medium of instruction would confer academic and career benefits, in addition to social mobility opportunities, it appears from the literature that few attempts have been made to engage faculty or students in deciding how quickly English as a medium of instruction should be introduced, or what courses to begin with.

English for International Study

All students at university in China, irrespective of their major area of study, are required to study the English language, not only to enter university, but also in order to graduate. Those majoring in subjects other than English are required to sit the College English Test (CET) before graduation. Some students with excellent English skills may opt to become English Majors, but most choose a range of what they perceive as being more prestigious subjects, such as business, engineering, etc., often with a view to graduate study in a native English-speaking country.

To meet these needs, universities offer one or more of the following types of English language programs: courses that focus on English for everyday communicative purposes, English

for Academic Purposes (EAP), to prepare students for college coursework, exam preparation courses, and English language institutes that focus on language and cultural training specifically. However, according to some research, there is a widening gap between teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of English teaching in China (Wen, 2016). For example, many teachers do not have the requisite skill set to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. The motivation of students often suffers if they have to study in the same group with students who are not in the least motivated, or whose ability is much lower, as large classes mean that streaming is not always an option, or even something that many teachers know how to do. Added to this, many teachers do not know how to differentiate leaning, with the ensuing result being that many students become demotivated.

Students' dissatisfaction with English language learning outcomes at universities is exacerbated by a traditional over-reliance on 'chalk and talk' teaching. Therefore, professional development for teachers assumes importance for language centers (Hu & Leiden, 2005; You & Conley, 2015; Vagi et al., 2017).

For the ever-increasing numbers of Chinese students, academics and professionals for whom academic and professional mobility has become the norm, English for international study needs commitment on the part of universities. Many return to China after a number of years abroad, and they in turn wish to continue to use English in their careers. How, then, can universities and language centers support what are commonly called the 'returning Chinese' in their profession?

Planning for Sustainability

Language centers make continuous attempts to improve the services they provide to both students and staff, constantly seeking ways to enhance the delivery of language provision. Planning, essential in order to secure their long-term success, needs to be followed by implementation, (re)evaluation, changes and realization of improvements. Leal Filho et al (2018)state that planning by itself is never enough, needing to be complemented by concrete measures (see Table 1). Such measures, should, in turn, be evaluated with a view to generating chances that may lead to real improvements. They posit that planning in any higher education context needs to be a constant feedback loop.

Table 1.
Some Elements of Planning in a Higher Education Context

Item	Relevance
Definition of goals	Set-up of priorities
Resources management	A more adequate use of resources
Inclusiveness	Engaging the various stakeholders
Diversity of themes	Cater for the plurality of topics, courses and programmes on offer
Awareness of markets	Better overview of requirements from the labour market and its needs
Analytics	Interpretation of meaningful patterns
Consumer satisfaction	Enjoyment of the teaching/learning experience by students/staff

Adapted from: Leal Filho et al., 2018,p. 714

Teaching and Learning

Research has consistently shown that teachers have a significant impact on their students' educational outcomes (Condon et al., 2016; Gyurkoet al., 2016; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Finding teachers who are highly qualified and able to differentiate instruction is key to meeting the diverse needs of English language learners (McFarlane, 2016), and will help improve their academic performance.

Teaching language comprises interaction and exploration among learners and teachers, with teachers as guides and facilitators. To engage learners, pedagogical practices need to be more constructivist than didactic, with a focus on inquiry-based and problem-based learning, in order to actively promote student engagement. It is acknowledged that creating such an environment will require significant additional work for teachers to adapt the materials to their diverse student populations (Samson & Collins, 2012).

Language learning needs to be situated in context (Atkinson, 2011; Valdés et al., 2011). Therefore, disciplinary language learning is also essential for students to succeed in academic and career goals (Kibler et al., 2011), and essential for development of critical thinking.

Language centers emphasise learners assuming responsibility for their own learning. John Dewey (1933) strongly believed that learning to think is the central purpose of education. Critical thinking allows students to develop competency by ensuring they build their skills in terms of evaluating information, forming judgments, examining the alternatives and arguing in a reasoned manner (Ku, 2009).

As a result, critical thinking is considered to be the application of cognitive strategies that promote the desired outcome, such as becoming proficient in the English language, for example. Critical thinking can be said to be goal-oriented, purposeful, and reasoned. It promotes problem-solving, and is a key factor in decision making. Critical thinkers are able to apply such skills appropriately, without hesitation.

Bagheri (2015), in a study of freshmen at a university in China, found that students with higher critical thinking ability will use more variety of strategies in learning the English language. Therefore, critical thinking and language learning success are intrinsically linked.

Background Context

Chinese students face increasing costs for tertiary education, resulting in students and their families behaving more like consumers who are effectively paying for better career prospects after graduation (Chung et al., 2009). Thus, universities increasingly find themselves in a challenging situation, navigating socio-political changes, growing numbers of students and a changing context in English language pedagogy. It should be noted that in China, university students often learn English at commercial language centers, where the focus is on intensive TOEFL and SAT preparation.

The university in this study is a public institution that was established in 2012, with a student cohort of almost 4,000 students. The university is expanding quickly, and made the top 350 of the 2019 Times Higher Education World University Ranking list. A university with research, innovation and entrepreneurship as its mission, there is a male-female student ratio of

3:1. Goals are clearly defined by the institution, which is seen as one of the reasons that expansion is happening successfully (Jowi et al., 2013).Against this background, the Center for Language Education is expected to facilitate programme development, syllabus design, English for special purposes, testing and technology innovation.

The organizational structure is usually chosen according to the goal of the organization and to the type of human resources within the organization. The CLE is, with its more than thirty full-time staff members and over two thousand students every year, a language center that has grown substantially since its inception in February 2016. It provides language training for non-specialists, both students and staff, as well as Mandarin classes for international students and staff.

Research Question

This research aimed to explore, through a case study, what was involved in establishing a Center for Language Education at a Chinese university, and, specifically, the experiences of staff and students as a profound shift occurred from teacher-led classes to student-centred ones. Three specific research questions guided this study:

1. To what extent have learning and student-centred teaching acquired prominence as CLE priorities?
2. What are the key changes that have affected the CLE's (and, to a certain extent, the wider university's) development, particularly in relation to learning and teaching?
3. How can the findings of this study inform the future priorities and development of the CLE?

Method

Data for this qualitative case study were gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting between thirty minutes and one hour. The interviews were first recorded and later transcribed, leading to a codification of data, with themes emerging as a result of this process (Miles et al., 2014; Silverman, 2015).Interviewing was also accompanied by observations of the actual teaching and learning process (Tarnopolsky, 2006).

The case study supports the principles of action research, in that it is seeking out ways in which CLE can provide an enhanced quality of English language provision. In common with much action research, findings are neither conclusive or absolute, due to the context-specific nature of the research (Koshy, 2010).All the necessary phases in action research that Burns (2005,p. 6) refers to (namely, exploring, identifying, planning, collecting data, analysing, hypothesising, intervening, observing, reporting, writing and presenting) were adhered to.

The choice of participants was based on convenience sampling. Sixteen participants were selected, eight teachers (four Chinese and four non-Chinese) and twelve undergraduate students, three each from the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior groups. Graduate students were not included, as courses for graduate students were in the process being determined by the School of

Graduate Studies at that stage. Each participant was assured of anonymity to encourage forthrightness in terms of answers.

Data were also collected using different secondary sources of evidence: website information, documents and literature review data. The analyses of the data have taken into account areas suggested by UNESCO (2014), namely, learning environment; building capacities of teachers; empowering students; development for sustainability.

Results and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from the data, namely revitalising the learning environment, staffing, diverging stakeholder views and governance, each of which will be addressed in turn:

Revitalising the Learning Environment

Prior to the establishment of the CLE, class size was approximately fifty, with no dedicated English language classrooms, little use of technology in the classroom, with the grammar-translation method being frequently deployed.

Carol, a Chinese teacher who had taught English prior to the establishment of the CLE, reflects on the process of changing the language learning environment: *"It was unbelievable, what happened in two months, to open in February for the spring semester. The new director had focus groups with students and teachers. So many wanted classrooms just for English, and that's what happened – smart boards, display boards to display student work, new furniture that wasn't in rows, like the other classrooms, allowing chairs and desks to be moved easily for group work, a teacher working full-time on new materials so that we could have a more relevant course for spring semester that made it easier to achieve the learning outcomes. Looking back on it, how did it all come together?!"*

Critically speaking, the design and implementation of plans need to take local circumstances into account (Leal Filho et al., 2018). By doing so in this instance, effective use was made of the propensity of the university community to come together to achieve a common goal. Tom, a senior, describes his experience: "*The older students felt a little jealous in some ways, because we didn't have this environment, although some felt happy that they didn't have to study the extra hours in English. The new curriculum put a lot of stress on studying English for more hours, which we didn't have, but it just seemed more fun, with many more teachers, and more foreign teachers of all nationalities. We could see teachers talking to each other and students more – it was nice."*

The CLE began to see dynamic cooperation among staff on various levels, from materials development to staff training. Some of this took place in the CLE itself. Research has indicated that that language centers need dedicated, purpose-designed space (Agai-Lochi, 2015; Ruane, 2003). This facilitates the integration of language learning functions and provides teacher preparation areas, student consultation spaces, relaxation areas, etc. The task of creating purpose-designed units involves not just those who work in language centers but also designers, engineers and others who have to build them.

George, a freshman, describes the CLE as he saw it when it was opened on campus: *"It was so cool – the big letters just outside that said 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world', by someone famous. Then the common space, where we could have meetings with teachers, and smaller, private booths where peer tutoring could take place. A lot of areas for different purposes, space for workshops. Some of my friends wanted to have work experience there, because the vibe was good."*

The difference between the teachers' room before, and the new, purposely-designed space with an emphasis on integrated technology and interaction, as well as aesthetics and comfort, was considerable.

The learners took note not just of the physical space, but also what was being learned, (Bagheri, 2015; Ku, 2009) as Jake, a sophomore student, shows: *"We could see that things were definitely getting interesting! Smaller classes were a big change. It wasn't so easy to skip class, because the teacher would notice! But we were also having more discussion, things that we'd been asking for, such as project presentations. We had to think more deeply – and do it in English!"*

Learners could see that courses were being developed on the basis of their needs and interests(Atkinson, 2011; Valdés et al., 2011), with the methods being used in class also taking the attitudes of learners into account, as Maria, a sophomore student, explains: *"Some students had been asking for some new courses, like communication skills. This started to happen, with courses on TOEFL and CET also. It felt good to be listened to, to have more variety too."*

Charles, a junior student, notes that not everything was developed at once, but, instead, developed happened gradually, over time: *"New courses weren't all added at once, but every semester. Then, workshops began to appear on topics that we wanted help with, such as interview skills or resume writing. Peer tutoring started. An international student came for the summer and had conversation classes with students in the book bar. English Corner became more exciting. It began to feel more international."*

Charles' view is echoed by Rob, a senior student, who states: *"It's fun, seeing the changes happen over time. It wasn't like that before, and it makes me want to do graduate study here, because I can see how this will move into the graduate area. The courses that are happening with undergraduates are now getting better."*

Learners and teachers became more satisfied with the learning outcomes of courses, students' attendance stabilized, and the teaching/learning process became more dynamic, as noted by all concerned.

Revitalizing the learning environment depended heavily on staffing, and this was an issue raised by all participants.

Staffing

Given that the university leadership said at the beginning of December 2015 that it wanted all staff in place for February 2016 and for the CLE to open then, not the following fall, as was originally planned, with teachers being hired internationally, staffing was always going to be the

biggest challenge. The university leadership did not want a concentration of Chinese teachers, so ensuring the Chinese teachers were supported and valued by the CLE took on greater urgency.

In January 2016, the Human Resources department admitted it did not know how to organize the visa process and necessary layers of approval from various university committees for international teachers' formal appointment. Planning and candidate selection had not been supplemented by concrete measures on the part of university leadership (Leal Filho et al., 2018).This necessitated contracting a local teaching agency to ensure that teachers would be in place for the beginning of spring semester. Around half of the teachers subsequently employed by the university came through such an agency. However, the qualifications and experience of these teachers did not match those who had been directly hired by the university, and the difference soon became apparent, as William, a freshman, explains:"*There were a lot of foreign faces on campus, new teachers, and that felt good. However, not all the teachers were professional, and the students could see this. Now it is ok, but, at first, there were a few teachers who would not turn up to class on time, or at all, and who didn't seem to care about their work. They never spent any time with students or on campus, just class and leave. Some of these teachers had to be changed suddenly, and this wasn't easy for students."*

Consistent with the literature, teachers have the most significant impact on students' learning(Condon et al., 2016; Gyurkoet al., 2016; Taylor & Parsons, 2011), which means that great care has to be taken with recruitment. Williamdid not realize, but these issues occurred with some agency teachers. The majority of agency teachers, though, it should be noted, were professional. Where teachers were directly hired by the university, all was not always plain sailing, at least outside the classroom, as John, a teacher directly employed by the university, surmises: *"I liked being on campus, with students who were more motivated than the students I'd taught before, and with opportunities for ongoing professional development. I still like it, but what makes it so hard for many of us is our contracts. Foreign teachers get contracts for one year only, not like the Chinese teachers. This makes it hard to feel secure or appreciated."*

Non-Chinese teachers were given contracts of one year's duration only, at the insistence of the Human Resources department. This represented a challenge, as it intensified the rate of teacher turnover, thus proving an issue for both resource planning and teacher quality (Vagi et al., 2017). It will continue to remain an obstacle to sustainability for as long as the Human Resources department and university leadership insist on one-year contracts, and this organisational structure will remain something at least partly determined by such practices.

However, it needs to be stated that universities are complex organizations with a unique set of features. They have certain characteristics that need to be understood and that dominate the culture of academic institutions, not least in different cultural contexts.

On the other hand, Paul, an agency teacher, feels valued, and has thrived at the CLE and university:"*I appreciate the professional development opportunities offered, and though I have my other commitments on other campuses, I attend workshops when I can and enjoy the professional discussions. At first, the Chinese and non-Chinese teachers didn't mix, but now they do. I also like the CLE lecture series, like when a professor from Hong Kong came and gave a*

really interesting talk. There are opportunities here, and it's up to each individual teacher and student to make the most of them."

As could have been predicted, the area of teaching quality immediately became the biggest priority once staff were hired (Wen, 2016). One of the appointments was that of an assessment coordinator, for standardization of testing at the CLE. All CLE academic staff were trained in this area, test specifications were created and new tests were introduced for streaming and placement.

Another broad area was training CLE teachers in soft skills methodologies. The CLE started bringing international experts to train the staff in pedagogy and organizing internal staff training with the help of its own experts(Hu & Leiden, 2005; You & Conley, 2015; Vagi et al., 2017). CLE staff who, apart from teaching, also specialize in research, started to meet regularly in order to keep up-to-date in the field, and disseminate research results to the university as a whole.

Anna, a Chinese teacher, also speaks about the evolution of the CLE and the opportunities to be availed of: *"Before the CLE was formed, the teachers were completely ignored by the university. We were told to just teach, not do research, which those of us with PhDs could not understand. The director fought to change that. Now there is more of a focus on research, and there are many professional development opportunities, even some funding available. It's not like before."*

The fact that the CLE supports its employees in their academic career means an obvious shift from the position of a mere service center towards a more academic university unit. A supportive work environment and investment in continuous professional development can aid staff retention for an organisation (Hu & Liden, 2015), as well as increasing effectiveness (You & Conley, 2015).

Flynn, a junior student, has noticed this change: *"The CLE professors now seem really professional and academic. They have a lot of training, and I see there is also a lot of research. I think they are now like professors from the other faculties, and that is a good thing."*

Lacey, a freshman student, shares Flynn's view: *"There's a buzz about the CLE. Things seem to be professional and supportive at the same time. I like the community feel. I see workshops for students, and also for teachers. Everyone is learning."*

What Flynn and Lacey recognise is that the CLE has developed supportive approaches to the role of the teacher.The training and development of these teachers (Samson & Collins, 2012), working together in multi-tasking teams, were major factors in the successful development of the CLE. The skills of these staff are considerable. Many have made the transition into areas such as administration, quality assurance and technology in education.

Issues with staffing and their resolution by the CLE gradually began to lead to a little more autonomy by the university. Subsequently, as all the financial, Human Resources (HR), pedagogical and research responsibilities were shifted to the CLE, diverging stakeholder views became apparent. Also, there is a growing acknowledgement by the university administration of the value that non-native Chinese teachers of English provide, partly helped by showcasing the research strengths of these teachers.

Diverging Stakeholder Views

The CLE firmly believes in learners as being primary change agents. Students at the university clearly indicated on many occasions that they wanted support to set up some clubs related to English language learning. One such club was a public speaking club, as this was an area many students felt they needed to be more proficient in. Charles, a junior student, was instrumental in setting up this club: *"Our idea in setting up the club was that teachers would join us. It didn't exactly work out like that, as one teacher was really helpful, but not the others we asked. They said they were too busy, didn't want to be doing such things in the evening, all kinds of excuses."*

As the CLE gradually expanded and raised its profile, it became apparent that there were differing views on what the role of an English teacher was, as Lily, a non-Chinese teacher, explains: *"I suppose in a way we are victims of our success, in that the English teachers are asked – and expected – to become involved in everything, even if we have other demands on our time. I should add that this is a challenge for non-Chinese teachers, not Chinese teachers, as the perception is that they have homes and families to return to, whereas we are always available. It's not just students who expect us to become involved in everything, also university administration, but we are teachers, not show ponies!"*

This issue actually stemmed from a diverging view of the role of English teachers, who the university community at large felt should be available for all kinds of cultural exchange, whereas many of the non-Chinese teachers were dealing with adjusting to a new and very different culture, wishing to be treated on a par with their Chinese colleagues. It is a continuing negotiation of roles, partly alleviated by employing a teacher who teaches English to university staff and has shown commitment to encouraging student initiatives such as clubs and societies. It does appear in this instance that students were led to believe by university leaders that the CLE teachers would be involved in many extra-curricular activities, yet nobody had consulted with the CLE teachers themselves about how they felt regarding this (Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Hu et al., 2014).

While many teachers are generous with the time and skills they devote to extra-curricular activities, there is no obligation on them to engage in any campus-based activities other than their contracted teaching and office hours. Accordingly, administration has to rely on the goodwill of teachers if they are to undertake any teaching hours outside of their regular schedules. This would require a renegotiation of contracts, which is a fundamental university policy issue.

Keri, a sophomore student, also notes that views sometimes differ on what the CLE itself should offer: *"Some students want more CET and TOEFL prep courses, but I disagree. I want more of a focus on culture, for example. I'm a peer tutor, and I think that's important for the CLE, as we shouldn't always look to teachers for help, but each other. This idea wasn't very popular at first, but it's changing – people's thinking continues to change, and that's normal."*

What Keri is touching upon is the conflict that language centers across the globe face, namely, the expectation which is held by many in university leadership that a language center

provides a service, whereas to those who work in such centers, the role needs to be academic, if teaching and learning is to be effective (Wen, 2016). Penelope, a Chinese teacher, offers the following view: *"When I started here, the English teachers were treated as second class citizens. With the CLE and having a director to represent us, we finally have more of a voice. It is still a battle between the leadership who thinks we are just here to teach and our view that we are academics. For the first time this year, the CLE was allowed to enter a teacher into the university teaching competition – and he won a prize! Some of us are now active in research, as we are being supported. It's not easy, because even some students need to change their view of us, to see us as they see their professors in other subjects. But it's changing."*

What has made the difference, as has become clear, is how the CLE is run.

Governance

Matters of governance are not always easy for language centers in higher education. Planning can difficult, as language centers developed in response to emerging needs and also changing directives of a top-down nature that do not consult those on the ground involved in implementing such changes (Dearden & Macaro, 2016). They have to operate within universities that exercise a great deal of control over their activities, while being conscious of the growing importance of English-medium instruction on campus (Earls, 2016; Lasagabaster et al., 2014; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014; Fenton Smith et al., 2017).

This is something the CLE has always been aware of, as Jenny, a Chinese teacher, sums up: *"Setting up the CLE wasn't easy. It's still not easy. It was controlled by university administration in the beginning, and that had to be carefully negotiated. It was like walking a tightrope!"*

Although admittedly not easy, the CLE has been mainly successful in satisfying the demands of the university, even when such demands have been contradictory. Perhaps one reason for this is something that Olive, a senior student, has observed: *"I think maybe the reason the CLE is a hit is because it's not a traditional department. It's attractive to different kinds of students, offering different things for different people".*

Racher, a junior student, concurs: *"The CLE does things differently –the classrooms, the courses, and it doesn't only focus on the students with the perfect GPA who will immediately go to Caltech or MIT. It has something for everyone, and that's why students like it."*

This interchange of people, ideas and problem-solving, so that ideas of all stakeholders align (Hu et al., 2014), has also been noted by Zoe, an agency teacher: *"The CLE is trying to motivate people to work together, to cooperate more, to not be so much in competition with each other as professors seem to be in a few faculties. It's not without its problems, but overall, it works."*

The CLE has, by and large, succeeded in meeting the needs of many different kinds of learner. It has also sought to identify academic supporters in other departments to offer support in creating/offering new programmes (Kibler et al., 2011), resolving logistical issues (especially where frequent policy changes and financial processes are concerned), negotiating different

contractual arrangements for staff and, particularly important on a rapidly-expanding campus, acquiring space.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this paper is the fact that it is qualitative study that concerns one university, and, due to its qualitative nature, is necessarily dependent on the subjective interpretations of students and teachers. The CLE is a large living organism and its structure is still changing and developing within the boundaries that the university provides. More feedback from the staff needs to be drawn and questionnaires for future CLE students must be developed in order to understand whether and how these changes influence the process of learning and teaching.

The small number of participants was a limitation of this study. Involving teachers from other faculties who are using English as a medium of instruction is another research limitation, as well as providing a possible focus for future studies. Furthermore, the limitation of the small, qualitative nature of the study could be counteracted by an in-depth, longitudinal, quantitative study of teachers, students, other faculties and university leadership, and would yield rich data that would offset any claims of bias or subjectivity. Such a study would deal with the university as a whole, as well as other universities with language centers in China.

Recommendations

The CLE's successful development to date has been aided by pedagogical innovation, adaptability to numerous changes at the institutional level and effective use of technology. Success can be measured both in terms of growing numbers of students and courses, as well as outreach. However, changes in university structure and demands for English language teaching continue to accelerate. Building upon success requires planning for action and progress in key areas. These include enhancing the research profile of the CLE, continuing to innovate pedagogically and organisationally, and securing adequate resources.

Additionally, to help make those plans a reality, a core group of committed, influential people capable of implementing those plans is needed. A significant obstacle to the successful implementation of plans for sustainable growth lies in the area of human resources. The Human Resources department needs to provide support to the CLE in terms of hiring and supporting staff, leaving those staff free to concentrate on growing the CLE.

Conclusion

We have seen how the CLE, from humble beginnings, has enjoyed significant growth. It owes its success to many factors, not least the energy and commitment of its staff and a proven capacity to innovate and adapt. In particular we have seen how the CLE has successfully navigated a complex environment in a context of accelerated change and considerable uncertainty.

In this study a number of key points emerge. This is certainly an era of great opportunity for language centers in higher education in China. Yet, the future of language centers today is not guaranteed, depending as it does on the capacity of the members of language centers to work

constructively to resolve issues of common concern, an academic commitment to developing members' expertise through applied research, and a willingness to innovate in answering the needs of China's university sector.

These are the goals they need to set. If they can achieve even some of them, there will be many beneficiaries, among them the students and their teachers, for whom improved and more effective language learning opportunities must remain the top priority.

The feedback from study participants, as well as other indicators, suggests that the organizational structure was well chosen and that CLE staff can profit from the opportunities it facilitates. Prior to the establishment of the CLE, there were no teacher training opportunities, very little technical support and research was considered a secondary issue. These issues are being addressed and dealt with.

Overall, it can be said that the focus on learning and teaching has gained momentum and become a priority for the CLE. Future practice will hopefully be improved as a result of a greater focus on research. The development of technology-assisted learning has opened up opportunities for different learning experiences and more flexibility to address the needs of an increasingly-diversified student population, including international students.

CLE management and the faculty deans and chairs should make an effort to cooperate and communicate with each other in a more effective way. The CLE needs to continually innovate and systematically encourage staff members to join it and exploit the advantages and opportunities it offers

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