The Learning Process in Intercultural Collaboration

Evidence from the eChina-UK Programme

Global People

**The Learning Process in Intercultural Collaboration
Evidence from the eChina-UK Programme**

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1. Introduction

The eChina-UK Programme was established in 2002 and originally comprised a small number of projects in which British and Chinese teams worked collaboratively to develop and pilot e-learning materials in the field of education. Phase 1 of the Programme spanned the period 2003 to 2005 and produced a number of practical outputs (Spencer-Oatey 2007). Three follow-on projects were funded in Phase 2, which started in October 2005, and these included research reflecting on issues of pedagogy as well as the creation of further teaching and learning materials. These projects ran until 2007 and, in December of that year, Phase 3 of the Programme was put in place to capture insights from the experiences of all of the completed projects. The goal of Phase 3, therefore, was to draw out the learning from Phases 1 and 2 of the eChina-UK Programme with respect to the management of intercultural aspects of international education projects.

In addition to the learning to be gained from the eChina-UK projects, the Phase 3 work included new research both into data generated in Phases 1 and 2 and into other sources of knowledge relating to intercultural effectiveness. The focus was on situating the learning from the eChina-UK projects into a wider intellectual context. The intention was to maximise the understanding of the intercultural management of international education projects and enable the production of resources for those engaged in current and future projects of this kind (Reid et al. 2009).

This paper presents findings from one strand of the research carried out during Phase 3 of the eChina-UK Programme. The objective of this strand was to draw on data from eChina-UK and related studies in order to produce theoretical and practical insights into the nature of intercultural collaboration as a learning process. The focus on learning was primarily determined by the realisation (from analysis of the eChina-UK data and other studies of intercultural collaboration) that building intercultural competencies required significant attention to individual and group learning. Any practical recommendations and resources developed in Phase 3 of the programme would therefore need to pay attention to how participants managed their learning during an international partnership. Similarly, we might usefully be able to demonstrate how those planning such collaborations could benefit from embedding good learning practices from the outset of their work.

The purpose of this paper is to summarise and analyse the findings from the empirical work carried out within this strand of Phase 3 research. I have set out elsewhere the theoretical background to this research and specifically to the development of the learning process model utilised here (Reid 2009a). That model will constitute part of the material available to researchers, managers and other practitioners through the Global People Resource Bank (*www.globalpeople.org.uk*) developed in Phase 3 of the eChina-UK Programme. None of this work would have been possible without the sustained support and co-operation of our colleagues in the various eChina-UK projects and at our funding body, the Higher Education Funding Council for England.
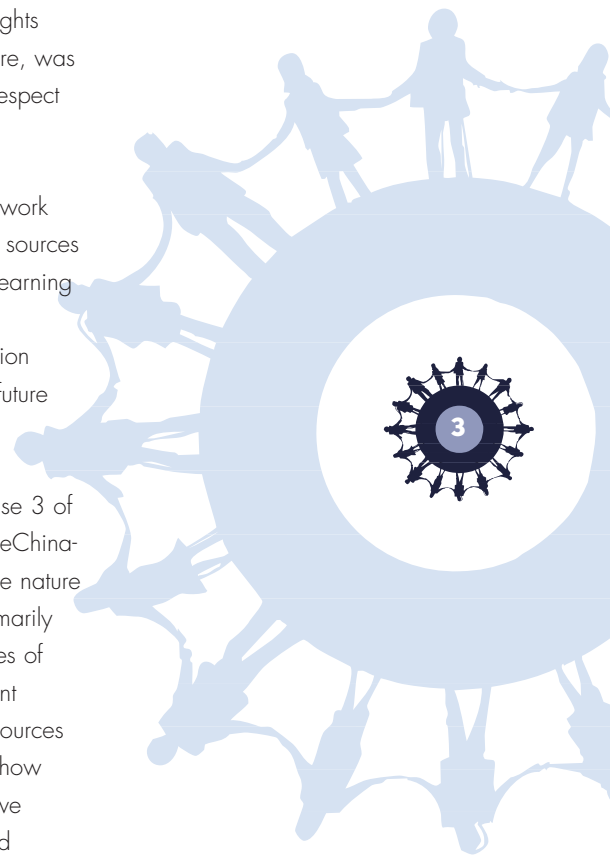
2. Research Design

At the outset of Phase 3, there was a considerable body of work available from the projects in Phases 1 and 2 which provided insights into the ways in which the projects had been managed and, in some cases, what learning had taken place for the participants. However, there was only limited material focused specifically on the intercultural learning that might have taken place and the majority of project outputs were concerned, not unnaturally, with the actual modules and courses that were being developed by the joint Sino-UK teams. This strand of research began therefore with a review of existing material to ascertain what evidence had been recorded of intercultural learning.

Much of the work in Phase 1 is represented in an edited volume of papers (Spencer-Oatey 2007), in which papers on the overall management of the programme (Spencer-Oatey and Tang 2007), the reconciliation of contrasting pedagogies (McConnell, Banks and Lally 2007) and the negotiation of diversity (Motteram, Forrester, Goldrick and McLachlan 2007) all provide insights into the teams' abilities to learn from their experience of managing cultural difference. In addition, there were internal reports (Spencer-Oatey 2004 and 2005) that provided further reflections on the lessons to be drawn from the ongoing programme. A good deal of the publication outputs from Phase 2 had yet to be completed at time of writing but project summaries were available in the formal project reports submitted at the end of the funding period (Joyes et al. 2007; Banks et al. 2007; King 2007). Further details from one project have been provided in short papers to a UK conference (Bowskill et al. 2007; Banks et al. 2007; McConnell et al. 2007).[1]

Parallel to the review of project outputs, work was done to develop a provisional model of learning within intercultural collaboration. This was based on existing literature in the field of learning and on a broader field of literature encompassing intercultural competencies, international partnership and project management. The resulting three-stage model of learning was designed both as a simple framework for organising data about learning and as a tool which could be used, by practitioners, to plan and manage individual and team learning in the intercultural project[2]

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[1]   The material presented in the current paper is concerned only with issues of the learning process of project participants and does not seek to summarise the very rich research and analysis done within each project. A full guide to the eChina-UK Programme's outputs is available at http://www.echinauk.org/intro.

[2]   For the full version of this see 'A Learning Process Model for Intercultural Partnerships' at www.globalpeople.org.uk

# 2.1 A conceptual model for learning in the intercultural project

The three main stages in the model are not intended to be strictly sequential: learning is a continuous process and it is likely that both the individual, and the group(s) of which they are a part, will visit and revisit sources of learning during the course of any new activity as they seek to make meaning out of experience (Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991). However, the sequencing has a logic in terms of the life cycle of a project and supports the use of the model for planning purposes.

1. **Acquisition**. Initial cultural learning may be restricted to limited *knowledge acquisition*. Learning might consist, for example, of acquiring contextual information about the 'alien' culture with which the participants are working. This would be the basic background information gathered pre-project. It helps to understand something about potential collaborators but is unlikely to alter participants' basic perception of their own culture or of how intercultural collaboration works. Insights will also be constrained by the quality and nature of the information available to the learner.

   Bennett (1993) offers a six-stage model of "intercultural sensitivity" which acknowledges that acquiring information about another culture does not, in itself, guarantee greater intercultural sensitivity or effectiveness. It is only, Bennett suggests, through conscious self-development that the individual can progress into the "ethnorelative" phase and develop a more sophisticated understanding of culture. Thus, although acquiring knowledge about cultural traits and values is an important step in building effective intercultural performance, it is by no means a sufficient one to guarantee that. A process of self-examination and targeted learning is also required to develop the competencies that will make the individual more effective in a culturally diverse team. Chief among these is what we can term "awareness".

2. **Awareness**. This consists of two main elements: developing self-awareness and reflection on experience. Success in intercultural collaboration will be significantly influenced by the participants' ability to *develop self-awareness* both prior to and during the collaboration. This is highlighted in the literature on intercultural competence as a key competency for improving intercultural sensitivity and thus effectiveness (Reid et al. 2009; Hunfeld 1997). Self-awareness is supported by developing a habit of conscious *reflection on experience* and therefore active learning from experience, which is regarded as integral to the learning process (Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991; Argyris and Schon 1974; Argyris 1984). This may particularly be developed within the project context through individual or group reflection on moments of difficulty or discontinuity which provide "rich points" of potential learning about cultural differences (Belz and Muller-Hartmann 2003).

   Using self-awareness to move beyond limited knowledge acquisition enables a more profound form of learning to take place. The participant uses both acquired knowledge and reflection on experience to question their own taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviours. The premises for their behaviour change as their

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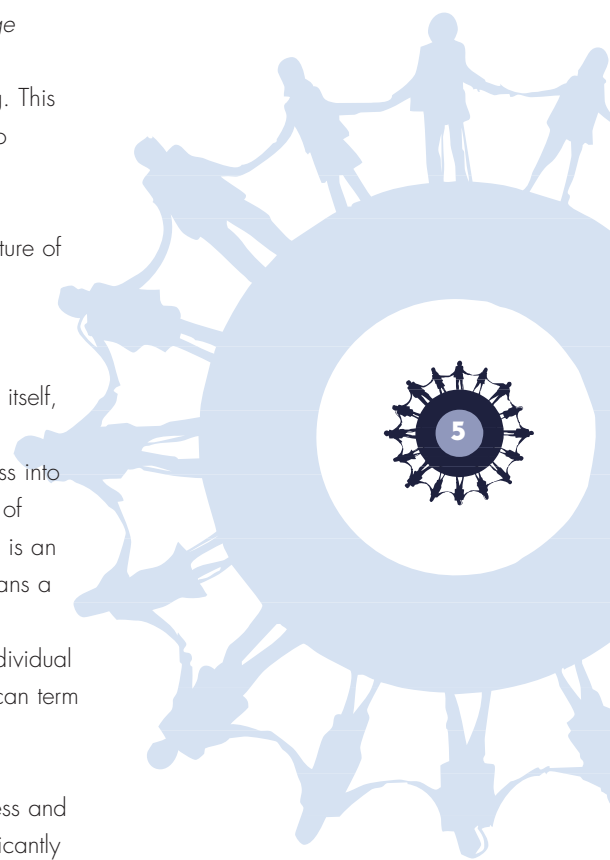
assumptions are challenged and they are able to become more interculturally effective by refining their understanding and ability to respond to the behaviour of others. The development of self-awareness and active reflection on experience may prompt the learner to question and amend the assumptions on which their own behaviour is based.

3. Embedding. The first two modes of activity are situated at the level of individual learning, but we are also concerned with *group and organisational learning* – the way in which project teams and their host institutions might share this individual learning and become more effective in managing intercultural collaboration. The link between individual and organisational learning is through the explicit sharing of learning and through co-operative reflection that enables the *embedding* of learning into the procedures, systems and cultural norms of the larger organisation (Ayas and Keniuk 2004; Simon 1991; Argyris and Schon 1996).

Conscious and explicit learning during the project experience can be compared to "formative" (Laurillard 1993) or "iterative" evaluation (Rein and Reid 2005) that enables learning to be fed back into the performance of the organisation. This means that the project team can adjust its behaviour but also its procedures and systems. The changed behaviour of the project team can (with the right support) in turn impact the institution by recommending changes in systems, principles and priorities. Such changes will also, gradually, alter the culture of the institution so that it may become more effective in its dealing with diversity.

On the basis of this preparatory work, a draft interview schedule was drawn up, structuring responses into the three-stage framework set out above. This was piloted with one of the project participants, a young Chinese academic who had acted as a materials developer and product manager on one project. She was an ideal test subject as she had been based in China but had spent considerable time at the UK partner university and had fluent English. Minor modifications were made to the interview schedule following this pilot interview and two versions were produced, one for face-to-face interviews and a second for self-completion via email. It was assumed that any interviews carried out with China-based project participants would be done remotely but that as many of the UK-based participants as possible would be interviewed face-to-face. The interview schedule was of a semi-structured form, inviting open responses to fairly broad questions about the respondent's experience on their respective project. A copy of the schedule is included in Appendix 1 to this paper. For the Chinese participants, the questionnaire was available in Chinese as well as in English.

A list of potential interviewees was drawn up, in consultation with the Programme Director and the Director or Manager of each of the three Phase 2 projects, in order to focus resources on contacting those participants that had been most fully involved in the project interactions. It was decided not to try to interview tutors and teachers who had piloted course material developed in the projects as these had, in many cases, already been the subject of extensive research within the respective projects. On this basis a provisional list of twenty-four potential interviewees was established. The aim was to interview as many of these as possible, ensuring a mixture of UK participants, UK-based Chinese participants and China-based Chinese participants. In practice, following the pilot interview in May, a

further 19 interviews were carried out over a period of five months. Of these, 13 were done in English face-to-face and 4 by telephone or Skype chat, where the respondents completed the questionnaire in advance of the 'phone conversation. Three were completed and returned by email: these were all China-based participants for whom the questionnaire was translated into Chinese. Of the 20 participants interviewed, 16 were UK-based during the project and four China-based, though, of the UK participants, three were not UK residents. A minimum of six participants were interviewed from each of the three Phase 2 projects.
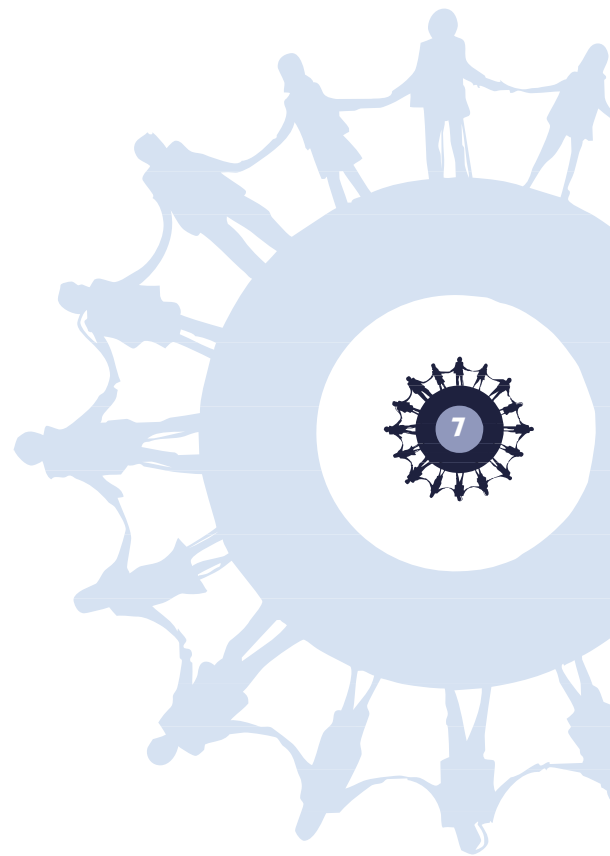
3. Main research findings

3.1 The intercultural learning process in Phase 1 of the eChina-UK Programme.

It is clear from the available material on Phase 1 of the Programme that the structuring of the programme (i.e. its funding, scale and institutional framework) created substantial obstacles to learning during the *formative phase of preparation and knowledge acquisition.* The scope of the Sino-UK collaborations was wide and the scale of the overall programme ambitious; the participating institutions were matched in an "arranged marriage" (Spencer-Oatey 2005) with the process of selecting and funding institutions differing markedly between the UK and China. Initial meetings between the respective teams were organised by the central funding bodies, rather than by the project teams themselves, and this slowed progress on gathering information, accessing key informants and establishing initial lines of communication.

Neither institutions nor individual team members were selected on the basis of prior intercultural knowledge or expertise although there were individuals on the UK side with substantial experience in working with China and in handling international collaboration. On the UK side, none of the project teams included Chinese speakers and this was an omission rectified later in the Programme. Not surprisingly, all teams experienced considerable obstacles in the early stages as the problems of communication between the UK and Chinese participants proved greater than had been anticipated. The absence of participants who could "cross boundaries" (Motteram et al. 2007) and establish empathy with the diverse groups of participants slowed the mutual learning process in both knowledge exchange and the growth of cultural sensitivity.

Early contact between the UK and Chinese institutions highlighted the obstacles to reciprocal knowledge acquisition but also the need for cultural sensitivity and interpersonal competence in handling interaction. The lack of control experienced by project teams was perceived as a major issue and power was devolved in response to this problem. These problems in the early phases of the programme prompted awareness of the lack of specialist expertise both in intercultural management and to an increased appreciation of those who could act as 'brokers' between the cultures to handle sensitive points of negotiation. Teams worked relatively slowly towards establishing ground rules, communication protocols and a common understanding of key terms and concepts but this also constituted important learning that made expectations more realistic and thus shaped preparation for Phase 2.

The clarification of language proved to be a major element in the process of *developing awareness* and establishing a more *reflective process of experiential learning.* There were two main elements to this: firstly, the movement from initial (more abstract) discussion to the exploration of concrete educational materials forced participants to question and seek clarification both about the materials and the concepts and practices that underlay them;

secondly, the creation of collaborative teams and the opportunity for academics and learning technologists to work in specialist groups enabled the exchange of professional understanding. In the words of one of the project teams:

> Ideas and understandings of e-learning technologies, issues and practices, were constantly discussed, revisited and renegotiated through the process of developing and producing joint e-learning materials. (McConnell et al. 2007: 180)

Another factor which facilitated more effective collaboration was the time all of the projects devoted to building social relationships across the teams. This helped to generate trust as well as better mutual understanding and proved valuable at times when major misunderstandings or divergence of interests emerged between the UK and Chinese teams. Spencer-Oatey (2007) talks of the "extremely painful strategic moments" that occurred and argues that "the effectiveness with which the projects were able to work through them was largely dependent on the amount of trust that they had built up between project members during the earlier phases of collaboration." (2007:170)[3]
These observations confirm the findings of earlier studies of complex cross-institutional projects. In particular, Kavanagh and Kelly (2002) in a major ethnographic study of an international business partnership[4] concluded that, for the project to operate successfully, the diverse participants needed regular (face-to-face) interaction and the opportunity to create a community of practice in which a common language could be established

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> The design team became more of a community...through the development of a sense of mutual solidarity and trust that enabled the interaction of the constituent members to take on a new, more open and creative dynamic. In other words, a communicative space was created where people were able to develop a shared language game and a common set of norms and expectations to govern interaction. This latter component provided people with a sense of security and the confidence to participate openly in design discussions. (2002: 592)

The successful negotiation in the eChina-UK projects of these explicit difficulties contributed significantly to the creation of strong mutual understanding and more effective collaboration. The fact that much of the project experience was shared between team members meant that reflection on critical incidents and explicit discontinuities in the collaboration could result in *learning being embedded* in the knowledge, attitudes and practice of the team(s) as a whole. Motteram et al. (2007) note not only that "the resolution of.tensions led to a development in understanding of the interests of the different professional groups involved in the project" but that this learning resulted in change at the level of the system as well as the individual and the group. Using Engestrom's (2001)

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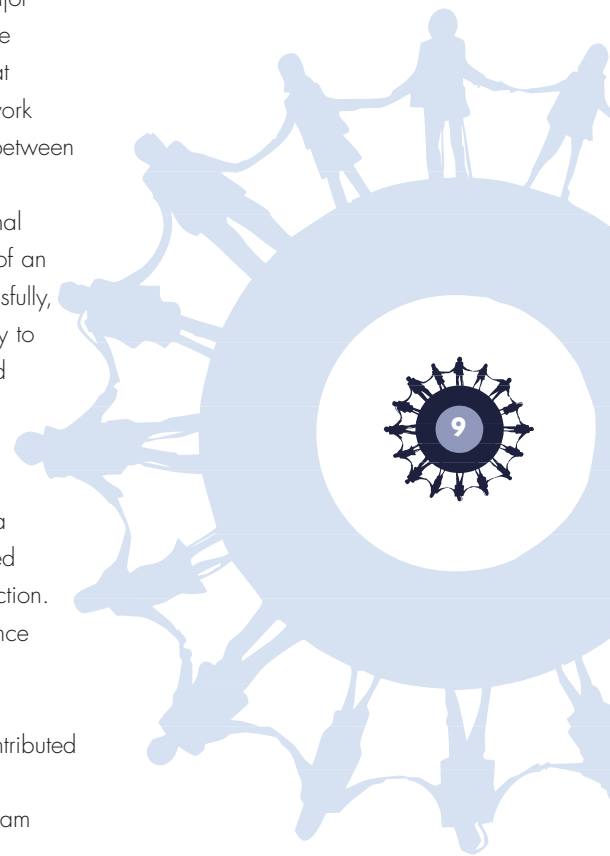
[3]　Spencer-Oatey draws here on the work of Canney-Davison and Ward (1999) for the concept of 'strategic moments' – potential project crises which have to be negotiated but which also present opportunities for reflection and team learning.

[4]　Many interesting parallels exist between the eChina-UK project and the subject of Kavanagh and Kelly's study, despite the substantial superficial differences in the projects.

concept of 'expansive learning', they suggest that "learning occurs at both the individual and the group level, and systems are changed as the participants interact with each other." (Motteram et al. 2007: 194). The confirmation of this may be seen, at the level of the programme as a whole, in the consistency of the intercultural lessons that were drawn from the experiences of Phase 1 projects (Spencer-Oatey and Tang 2007) and the compatibility of these insights with the established wisdom on intercultural effectiveness (Spencer-Oatey 2007; Reid et al. 2009).

3.2 The intercultural learning process in Phase 2 of the eChina-UK Programme

Following the successful, though difficult, work of the Phase 1 pilot projects, three projects were selected for Phase 2 in which the UK and Chinese teams sought to build on the pilot work by turning the materials into commercially and pedagogically viable courses for delivery to a wider market in China. A website was created to showcase the courses and materials developed and also to capture some of the most important learning from the ongoing projects (*http://www.echinauk.org*). The latter comprises a section of the website entitled 'Professional Learning' and provides substantial confirmation of the analysis of the learning process set out in Section 3.1 above. There are twelve sections presenting key points of learning and advice for other practitioners planning intercultural collaboration.[5] Especially worthy of note, in the context of the learning process experienced in the project, are the points which stress the need for thorough preparation e.g.

- Find out as much as possible about your partner's educational system, contexts and procedures. This may be time-consuming.
- Find effective ways of exploring team members' pedagogic beliefs, especially in relation to e-Learning.

And for culturally sensitive interaction that will develop reciprocal awareness:

- Allow plenty of time for team members to discuss their interpretations of key terms and concepts, and develop common understandings of them.
- Allow plenty of time for teams to get to know each other personally and to explore with openness each other's perspectives. This entails a willingness to listen carefully to different points of view, and not to dismiss them as old-fashioned or unworkable without true engagement with the (underlying) rationale for them.
- Ensure that each British and Chinese team has at least one bilingual speaker and cultural mediator who can actively promote effective communication.

Phase 2 projects therefore began with considerably greater experience and understanding of the process of intercultural interaction and could embed practical learning strategies into these projects at an early stage. Some evidence of how this worked is available in the final reports from each project (Banks et al. 2007a; Joyes et al. 2007; King 2008) and in a doctoral thesis submitted by one of the (UK-based) Chinese members of the eEducator

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[5]   The full range of the Professional Learning material is not presented here and readers should consult the website.

project (Chen 2008). One of the projects took as its focus the development of research into intercultural professional development for e-learning and dedicated a significant amount of its resources to exploring the cultural differences in pedagogy and establishing mutual trust and understanding between the UK and Chinese teams (Banks et al. 2007a). Greater awareness of the intercultural challenges led to a more strategic approach to handling those challenges: the external evaluator's report on the Intercultural Pedagogy project noted that

> The team decided to invest heavily in forming trust and enhancing understanding of one another. (Banks et al. 2007a: 10)

so that the project, again in the words of the external evaluator, was an "exemplification of professional dialogue" (Banks et al. 2007a:15). Attention was also paid to providing opportunities for social interaction "that assisted with the team-building process" (Banks et al. 2007a:5) and for learning through informal interaction where participants could exchange "personal information and insights" (Banks et al. 2007b:3). So the approach to acquiring knowledge was based far more on the joint negotiation of objectives, terms and pedagogies: the aim of developing reciprocal awareness between the Chinese and UK teams was integrated into the project management process. This strategic approach constituted a basis for the collaborative development of an e-learning course that similarly embedded good practice in intercultural awareness. Indeed, the UK project team, in their final report, emphasise the insight that

> intercultural understanding does not just happen – it takes time, needs to be consciously fostered and planned for. (Banks et al. 2007a:18)

The downside of this approach was that the mutual learning process risked occupying too great a proportion of the project's available time and resource. This was noted by the external evaluator in the final report:

> The warning is that resources need to be acquired or squeezed from existing provision for a great deal of sensemaking and writing work to be done. (Banks et al. 2007a: 9)

And the project team acknowledged that data generated in the project had by no means been fully analysed at the project's formal closure.

Although the other two projects were not so explicitly focused on the nature of intercultural learning, the awareness of the need to negotiate meaning between cultures was still evident. In the eEducator project, the production of a generic online training module was undertaken using a participative design approach which acknowledged the need for UK and Chinese participants to review, reflect and revise their collaborative work (Joyes 2006; Joyes et al. 2007; Chen 2008). The project's objectives were not simply to produce a reusable module for e-learning tutors but also to research the effectiveness of a participatory model for designing e-learning material. Therefore, throughout the design and testing, there was an awareness of the need to question and test cultural assumptions. This is evident in the formal activity plan for the project which incorporates a commitment to reviewing and revising the design teams' "ways of working" during Phase Three of the project (Joyes et al. 2007: 11). The development process also included a pilot run in a
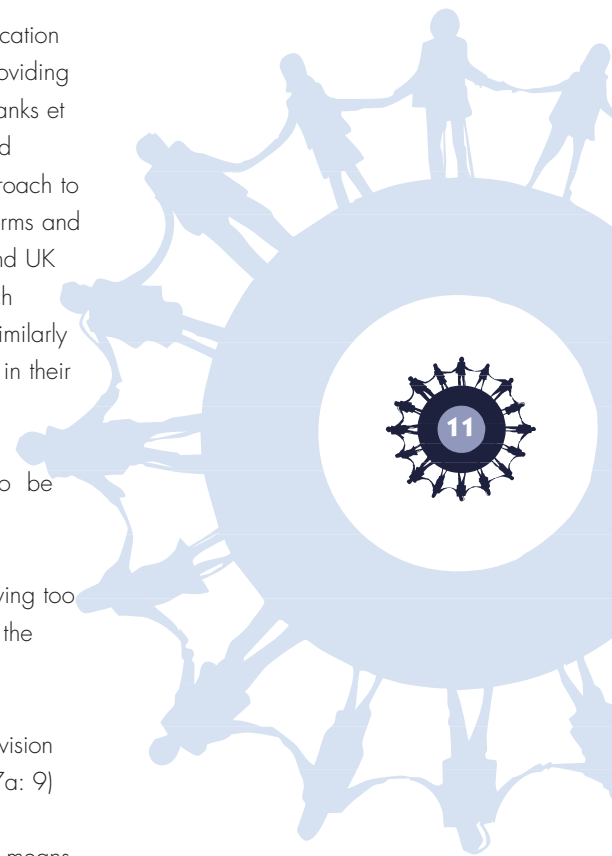
slightly different cultural setting (Malaysia rather than China) to evaluate the robustness and scalability of the course material.

Effective professional collaboration was underpinned by a commitment to develop genuinely collaborative working arrangements. As in the Intercultural Pedagogy project, the eEducator staff paid attention to the creation of strong social and personal ties within the development teams:

> Development of community and team spirit was seen as critical to effective ways of working and effective input into the design… (Joyes et al. 2007: 22).

Chen's doctoral research on the eEducator project confirms this observation, noting the frequency of social occasions "which turned out to be very good opportunities for participants to meet outside the project and to get to know each other." (2008, p. 126)

Within the collaborative process, participants used the opportunities to reflect and discuss in order to continuously adapt their working practices in the light of the constraints experienced. Different work teams encountered different problems and, consequently, developed different strategies for working together. As Chen observes:

> The most important lesson learned was to recognize and value the differences and find a way to make use of each one's strengths within the groups and to recognize that roles working face-to-face needed to be different to online…
> (2008: 294).

The third of the eChina-UK Phase 2 projects, CUTE 2, has less specific emphasis on intercultural collaboration than the other two and is more focused on the technical issues of adapting a successful UK e-learning course for use by Chinese institutions (King 2008). There is, consequently, far less attention to the process elements of the project and more attention to the product outcomes. Nevertheless, this is not to say that there is no evidence of cultural learning during the project. The final project report makes a strong recommendation for better knowledge acquisition during the initial, preparation stage of a collaboration in order to ensure technological compatibility:

> To assure the smooth implementation of the technological requirements necessary for the effective delivery of …any eLearning programme that intends to operate through a virtual platform, it is recommended to conduct rigorous risk assessment exercises and feasibility studies prior to embarking on any project. (King 2008: 9)

The team members also echo their colleagues on the other projects in highlighting the importance of clarifying conceptual meaning and establishing a "common language" between the UK and Chinese personnel. Ensuring that technical and pedagogical terminologies were thoroughly explored and mutually understood proved, for the CUTE 2 team, to be the crucial aspect in building effective collaboration.

> The development of a common language and the co-construction of new ideas involving bilateral discussion and input can lead to internationally agreed principles and qualitative changes in practice. (King 2008: 12)

A number of the CUTE 2 team members emphasised that differences in expectations and behaviour within the team were more likely to derive from differences in institutional or occupational culture than those formed by national culture. Some support for this can be found in Chen's account of the eEducator project where she found that the culture of participating institutions (i.e. hierarchy, decision-making processes, communication styles) had an unexpected level of influence on the design process (2008, p. 211). Although, in the eEducator case, the institutional differences tended to follow national cultural lines (i.e. Chinese universities were organised rather differently to UK ones), in the CUTE2 project, the most remarked-upon divergence was between the two participating UK institutions.

3.3 Findings from the research interviews

It was within the context of the data summarised in sections 3.1 and 3.2 above that I undertook the interviews with staff from each of the three Phase 2 projects. The two main purposes of the interviews were:

● To generate more detailed insights into the structuring, use and outcomes of the intercultural learning processes experienced by the participants;
● To compare the formal accounts of the projects' activities with individuals' personal recollections.

It was hoped that this would produce a richer account of how learning took place in the projects and provide practical insights into project planning and cultural interaction which would be of use to others facing similar challenges. It would also provide an opportunity to employ the 'Acquisition – Awareness – Embedding' model as a way of conceptualising and planning a learning strategy for an intercultural collaboration. As the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule and in non-standard circumstances there has been no attempt to organise and present data in a quantitative form. Instead, the material from the interviews has been organised thematically, using the learning process model described above.

The majority of the personal narratives provided to the author were consistent with the more formal accounts available in the project documentation. Consequently, there is no automatic repetition of observations from the previous analysis unless there is a specific need for emphasis or expansion. The aim throughout has been to draw out the generic lessons from the participants' responses and to illustrate this core learning with quotations and examples provided during the individual interviews.

Interview data

1. Acquisition

The three UK project teams differed somewhat in their preparation for Phase 2 of this programme, although all three were able to benefit from the lessons learned during Phase 1. One common activity, therefore, was the pooling of knowledge, both formally and informally, within each UK team so that the cultural learning from Phase 1 was acknowledged and shared with new members of the teams. Where there were team members with additional cultural experience informal discussion in the project's
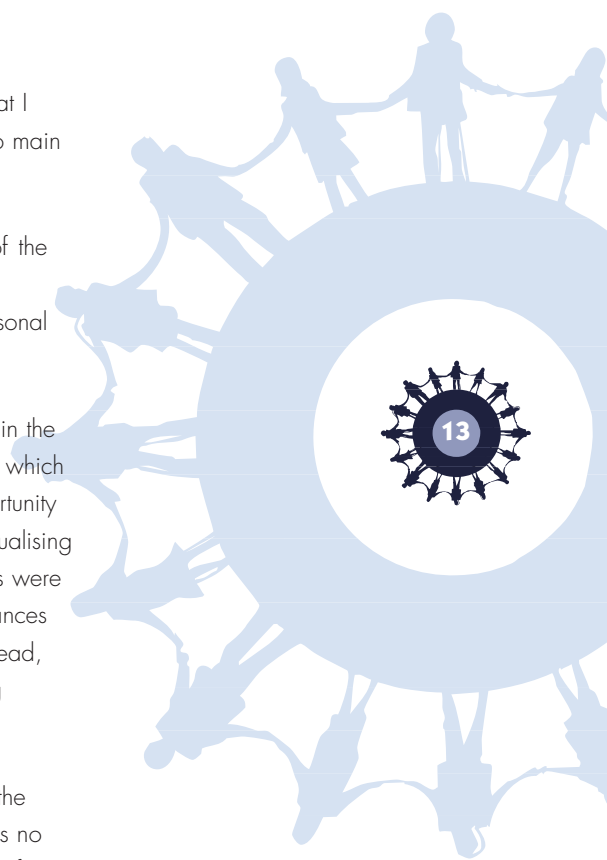
planning stage might include some sharing of insights about operating across cultures. It was notable, from the interviews with both the UK and the Chinese participants, that most teams contained a number of members with prior experience of working across cultures: the CUTE 2 team, for instance, was drawn predominantly from language teaching professionals, all of whom had worked and lived away from their home country and had extensive experience of working with internationally diverse students. Although, in most cases, this was an advantage – bringing valuable experience to the team – it was also acknowledged that it could be a risk: too much reliance on prior experience might result in the use of inappropriate assumptions and stereotypes.

Team members who joined the project at Phase 2 also reported undertaking individual research to learn more about topics such as the Chinese education system and learning styles. Knowledge acquired in this way could then be 'tested' against the reality of personal interaction with the Chinese participants. Quite a number of UK participants attempted to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of the language in a conscious commitment to building rapport with their new colleagues. Even learning a few words of Chinese could help to "break the ice" in early meetings. In some cases involvement in the project stimulated this interest further and led participants to continue their studies beyond the project's duration. Such activities were valued by the individuals for enriching the personal experience of working with Chinese colleagues as well as for their usefulness in aiding intercultural communication. On the Chinese side, a number of team members suggested that it was their English proficiency that was the main criterion for selection for the project.

There was considerable evidence that the experience of Phase 1 influenced the selection of team members for Phase 2: an effort was made to bring in Chinese-speaking staff and to locate members of the Chinese university teams in the UK so that there were stronger personal links across the institutions. This extended to the more technical roles: in the CUTE 2 project, the difficulties encountered in gathering information about the Chinese universities' technical capabilities prompted the senior manager in charge of e-learning technology in the UK to appoint a Chinese-speaking developer to try and facilitate communication. However, a number of UK respondents also emphasised the importance of recruiting individuals to a team who could demonstrate strong personal qualities: competencies such as listening skills, openness and "respect people's otherness" were cited as critical in operating effectively across cultures. These respondents stressed the importance of avoiding the use of cultural stereotypes and, instead, entering into a partnership with the other culture on the basis of being open to learning about each other.

> One will always encounter 'cultural' problems, many of which one can be
> aware of through literature and contacts. However, a basic willingness to
> accept 'otherness' and openness to the same is key. That has to be developed
> and cannot be trained. (Respondent, CUTE 2 Cambridge UK team)

Putting together a team was handled differently by some of the Chinese institutions. Respondents reported that, although they were selected explicitly on the basis of their prior knowledge of English language and culture, there was little opportunity to share knowledge prior to the project's inception: specialists were brought together by the

participating institutions with only a formal briefing about the project's aims and objectives. Any pooling of cultural knowledge was done informally both with Chinese colleagues and, in the early stages of the project, with their UK counterparts. In such circumstances, Chinese respondents echoed their UK-based counterparts in valuing the appointment of intermediary figures – individuals with 'insider' knowledge of both cultures who could support preparation and interaction by acting as a kind of cultural 'interpreter'. All three of the UK project teams acknowledged this by drawing on the expertise of Chinese nationals who could take on this role with the British staff. The eEducator project, for example, recruited a Chinese national who had worked on Phase 1 to join the UK team for Phase 2: as well as working in one of the development groups, she undertook doctoral research based on the eChina-UK project[6]. Colleagues described her role as of "huge benefit to the project" and "critical" to the team's ability to build cultural understanding.

The difficulties that the UK respondents reported with regard to gathering information and acquiring knowledge in the preparation phase of the projects related as much to organisational and technological knowledge as to specifically cultural understanding. A frequent observation was the need for project teams to do more to clarify the institutional and organisational operations of the Chinese partners. Initial contact with partners was often made difficult by a mutual lack of understanding of how channels of communication, lines of authority and levels of decision-making operated. Such obstacles also impeded teams' ability to gather information about technical capacity and, for one project at least, necessitated substantial additional work in testing and revising the technology in use. Respondents from both China and the UK emphasised the importance of establishing clear goals at the outset and the problems generated when objectives were unclear between the teams.

Another valuable form of preparation during the early stage of the projects was the exchange of materials between UK and Chinese teams so that there was an opportunity to see examples of previous work before final decisions were made about the current project. This reinforces two of the observations that emerged strongly from the formal reports reviewed in 3.2 above: firstly, understanding each other's conceptual models and specialist language is crucial to communication; secondly, having concrete tasks and material to work with accelerates this process of mutual understanding.

2. Awareness

In the interviews with project participants a distinction was made between personal awareness of cultural issues (including self-awareness) and cultural awareness shared within a team or sub-team. On a personal level the UK respondents were consistent in praising the experience of working with Chinese colleagues and the extent to which this increased their understanding of China. Virtually all of them considered that they had had a positive experience in terms of their cultural understanding and that it had

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[6]   See Chen (2008)

been of value to them personally as well as professionally. In the words of one UK participant:

> We started out looking at each other as aliens and ended up as friends.

A key element in building self-awareness was the need to clarify terminology and establish a common language with which to discuss the project material. This was one of the conscious activities pursued within all of the projects that helped to improve collaboration and has been discussed in section 3.2 above. It also prompted some UK participants to "deconstruct" their own taken-for-granted behaviour. As one of the Sheffield University team reported:

> It makes you question your own assumptions and take these apart.

This sentiment was echoed by Chinese respondents, who were also quick to acknowledge the personal growth engendered by participation in the project:

> Reflection has forced me to think deeply about our own cultural values and behaviour and … forced me to reflect on my own teaching and research.
> (Chinese respondent, Intecultural Pedagogy project)

The UK interviewees repeatedly emphasised the value of generic competencies in achieving intercultural effectiveness: it was, for most participants, less about learning about the Chinese *qua* Chinese and more about developing a level of self-awareness and a set of behaviours that would encourage openness in any intercultural collaboration. In practice, this meant suspending assumptions about 'typical' behaviour and seeing what your individual colleagues were like; being prepared to question your own culturally-determined behaviour; and investing time in building strong relationships. It was evident that many of the respondents had reflected quite profoundly on their experience and been able to identify attitudes and practice that would make them more interculturally effective.

Some of this personal reflection was undoubtedly both shared and supported by interaction with colleagues in each project team. However, the mechanisms by which this was done varied a great deal both between and within the project teams and their constituent work-groups. The three Phase 2 project teams varied in the extent to which they built formal provision for reflection and review into their project work. This was due both to the difference in the focus of each project and to the time pressures and technical problems which affected projects to a varying degree. Where the issue of cultural difference was a key focus of the project, then reflection on the intercultural experience was "very much part of the agenda"[7]. But, even in this situation, shared reflection on events with the Chinese could be restricted by organisational issues, such as the unequal status of participants when senior Chinese personnel delegated responsibility for meetings to more junior staff. There were also interpersonal restrictions on such shared reflection: UK staff in all projects acknowledged that it took time to

[7]   Interview with Project Director, Intercultural Pedagogy

build strong relationships and to foster the kind of openness between the UK and Chinese teams that would permit a frank exchange of views on cultural issues. This was no different for the Chinese participants, who put great value on the opportunity to reflect but acknowledged that the practical constraints of the project meant this only happened at a later stage when personal relationships had been well established.

Very nearly all of the interview respondents – UK and Chinese – could give examples of informal shared reflection when colleagues discussed the experience of working with a different culture and tried to build this learning into their future behaviour. This might occur directly following a more formal meeting with their partners, on the long journey between the UK and China, or as part of regular review sessions organised within project sub-teams. Outcomes from such discussions might include "Revision of plans, inspiration for ways forward in teaching, course, or materials design, insights into the working culture of participants and partners."[8] Teams were thus able to achieve a process of gradual adaptation to the cultural differences they encountered but it was one that was built on respecting those differences rather than trying to eliminate them.

There was also evidence of innovative attempts by individuals to address the need for cultural reflection. One of the Chinese staff, acting as Product Manager for one work-group, initiated a personal on-line diary that was posted within the group's electronic forum and offered her reflections on the cultural issues facing the project. This was an opportunity for colleagues to engage in informal discussion of their experience and to share their understandings of the issues raised by their collaborative work.

3. Embedding

We have shown in the two preceding sections how the acquisition of knowledge and the development of awareness also resulted in an active sharing of learning and an embedding of that learning in project teams and, on some occasions, in the wider partnership itself. Respondents to the interview survey were also asked about institutional embedding – how the cultural learning from their particular project was shared beyond the project participants and communicated to colleagues in different fields or to the management of the host institutions. For many participants this was a more difficult area upon which to comment: in both the UK and China, involvement with the programme for many individuals ended with the end of formal project funding and they had little chance to engage in additional dissemination of cultural learning. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence did emerge to show that the embedding of learning did not stop at the boundaries of the eChina-UK project teams but was shared with a wider audience.

The eChina-UK Programme itself was unusual in that the interests of the Programme Director and of a number of the senior project staff created a more formal commitment to intercultural learning and dissemination than might otherwise have been the case. Strong backing from the funders (HEFCE) permitted the final phase of the Programme to be dedicated to the process of reviewing and disseminating the generic cultural lessons

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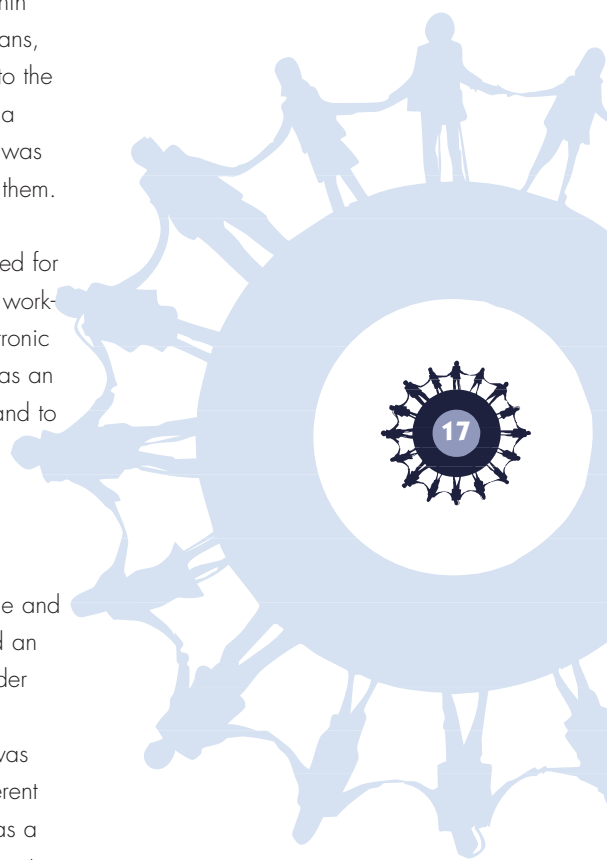
[8] Interview with Materials Developer, CUTE 2

of the projects. Although this, in itself, presents an admirable model in terms of how to extract additional value from intercultural collaborations, it is recognised that few projects will have the commitment and resources to undertake such a thoroughgoing self-evaluation. Nevertheless, there are many examples from the interview data that demonstrate the value of more localised transfer activities, some of which are summarised in this section.

One important factor for the potential transfer of project learning is the visibility of the project within its home institution and, by association, the level of support which it receives. This varied between the Phase 2 projects and between the UK and Chinese universities. At one extreme, the eEducator project became a showcase project for Nottingham University's internationalisation strategy and, in particular, its relationship with China: accordingly, senior project members were able to communicate cultural learning from the project very widely within the institution. At the other extreme, at least one of the Chinese respondents reported that opportunities for dissemination beyond the project members would be restricted by the relatively low profile of eChina-UK in his home institution. In between these extremes, however, participants in both the UK and China demonstrated a range of strategies for sharing their cultural learning from the project.

Using the learning to build new intercultural collaborations was one strategy, reported in both the UK and China, and a number of respondents acknowledged the potential to use the outcomes of eChina-UK to foster relations with other foreign institutions. Similarly, the experience of working remotely across cultures provided expertise to the participating institutions that could be employed elsewhere in their teaching and learning activities: extending their work in international on-line learning was mentioned by staff in both UK and Chinese universities. Other, more local, initiatives included providing seminars, workshops and reports for home institutions as well as the more conventional publication of formal academic papers. Three of the UK universities had been involved in work with their respective International Offices as a direct result of the project and this highlights the extent to which the cultural learning from the eChina-UK experience was recognised and valued by these institutions.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to present an overview of the process through which participants in the eChina-UK Programme achieved and shared their learning about working across cultures. Unavoidably, a great deal of material, from reports, papers and personal interviews, has had to be compressed to be presented in an accessible form. There are many issues, touched upon in this paper, that will need to be explored in greater depth in future publications from the team which has run eChina-UK and developed the Global People Resource Bank.

Promoting learning – especially individual and group reflection on experience – was acknowledged by members of all of the eChina-UK projects as an essential element in acquiring greater intercultural competence and thereby becoming more effective at working with partners from different national, organisational and professional cultures. The evidence from the project outputs and from our individual interviews confirms the value of paying attention to learning at each stage of the project in order to facilitate, capture and share important insights into the complex process of managing a successful international partnership. The organisation of this material into a simple Acquisition – Awareness – Embedding model was done here in order to emphasise those key actions that need to be taken before and during an intercultural collaboration.

Certain strategies for enabling or supporting cultural learning emerged with particular prominence from the interviews undertaken with Chinese and UK project participants. Three of these are worth highlighting again here:

1. **Using a cultural informant**. Recruiting someone to the project team who has experience of both participating cultures has a significant impact during both the preparation and delivery of a project. In the Acquisition phase, this individual can help with the identification of essential information, interpret initial data flowing from new partners and advise team members of areas both of knowledge and expertise that may be lacking. During the Awareness phase, they can act as an 'interpreter' of culturally-determined behaviour and a sounding-board for the team's own reflections and observations on their intercultural experience. In cases where relations within the partnership are endangered, the informant may become an active intermediary and help to broker better relations between the partners by clarifying language, behaviour or intentions.

2. **Making time for reflection**. Factoring in opportunities for individual and group reflection on experience was valued by participants, even if it was done relatively informally. Where project teams held regular meetings and included discussion of cultural issues, this was regarded as a positive contribution to cultural learning and thus to project effectiveness.

3. **Valuing individual experience**. Many respondents to our interview survey emphasised the personal satisfaction they gained from learning about another culture. In some cases this took the form of language learning or cultural research; in others this was about building close personal relationships with counterparts from another culture.
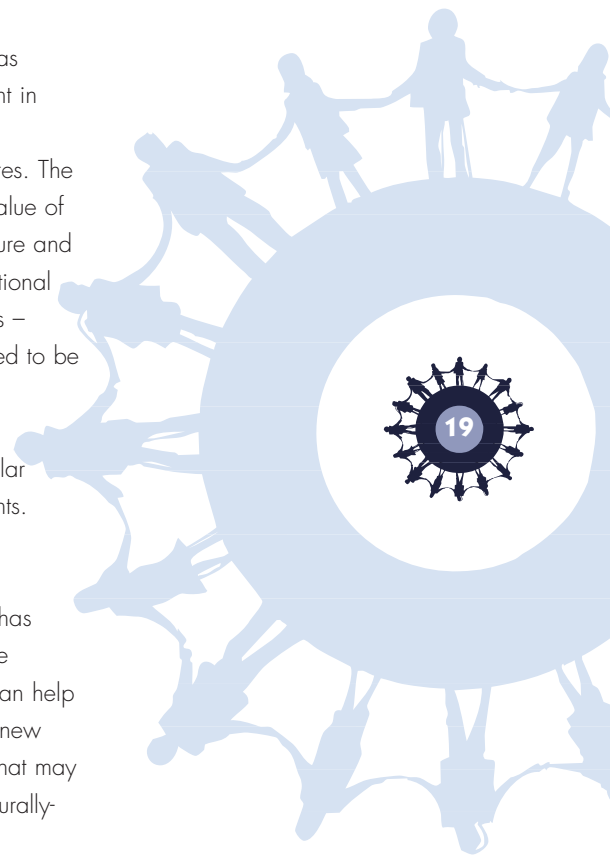
In all cases this meant that personal interest and good project performance went hand-in-hand: participants were able to learn about each other and, as a consequence, go beyond cultural stereotypes and work together as individuals. This can best be expressed in two very similar quotes from respondents in different projects:

"We started out looking at each other as aliens and ended up as friends." Said one UK participant, while another, reflecting on overcoming the challenge of being treated as distant 'experts' by his Chinese counterparts, commented: *"We went out there rather as 'gurus' and had to adapt until we were friends."*

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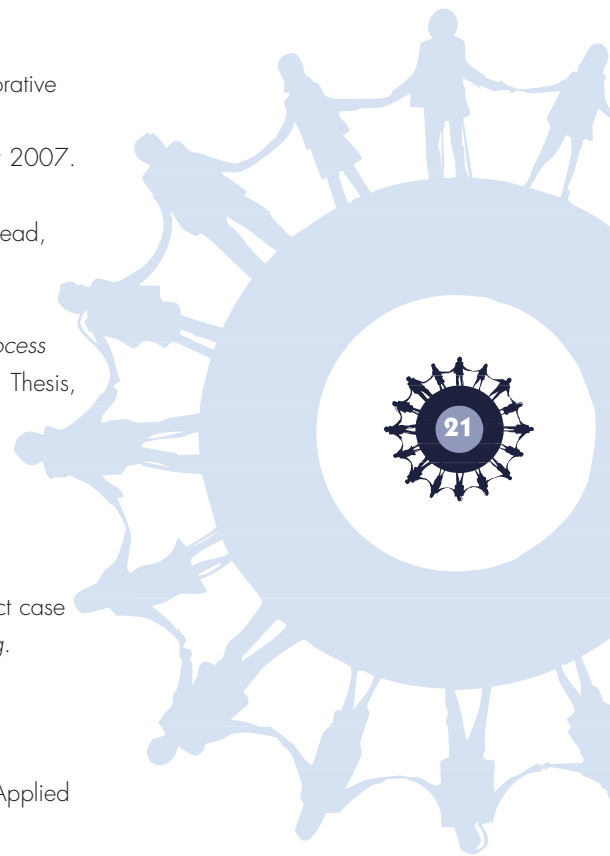
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APPENDIX 1

Interview Schedule used in face-to-face interviews

Name of respondent:

Date of interview:

Project: eChina-UK Phase 2 –

Duration:

Team:

Role:

Home institution:

Location during project:

Additional background information:

Introduction

I am interested in your personal view of the eChina-UK project you were involved in. I am not asking you to represent the views of the team as a whole, although it would be helpful to know whether you think that your view might differ from those of other team members. If there are project documents relevant to what we discuss (e.g. records of discussions or agreements), it would be useful to know about these.

Section 1 Knowledge acquisition/ Preparatory research

The first section consists of questions about the period before the project actually began work and when it was in its first, formative stage.

1) Did the project team of which you were a part have access to any information about your collaborators before the project began?

2) Did you do any advance research on the cultural challenges you might encounter in running the project?

3) Was the project team selected in such a way that intercultural experience and expertise were criteria for membership?

4) Did any of the team members have specialist cultural knowledge of their own that they shared with colleagues?

5) a) If any of the above were done, was it possible to judge the impact on the success of the project?

   b) If they were not done, were there cultural problems that arose that might have been avoided?

6) In your view, were the Chinese participants and the UK participants different in their preparation for the project?

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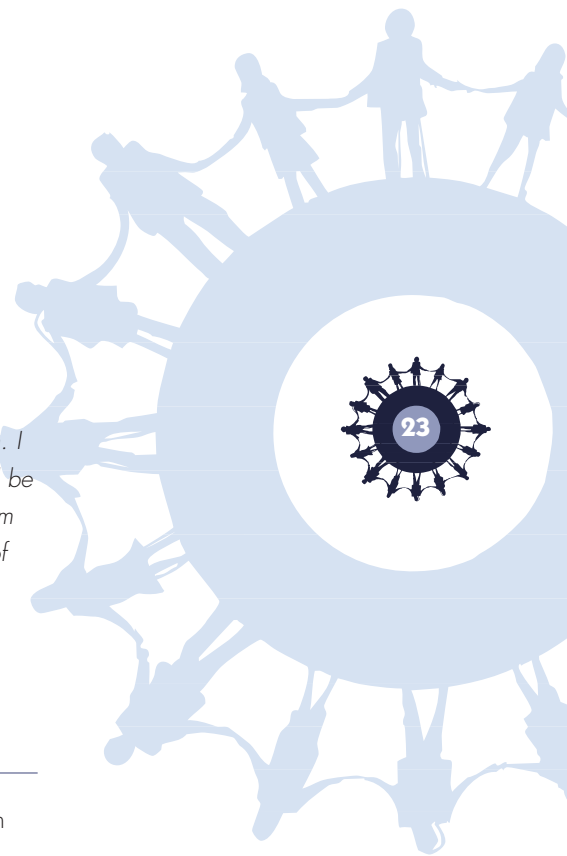
Section 2 Developing self-awareness

The second section consists of questions about the place of reflection and self-awareness in the project. (Clarify that they understand meaning of reflection).

1) Was there any formal provision in the project for reflection on events: for example, discussion and review at key stages?
2) Did any of this happen – in a planned or a spontaneous way?
3) If so, what were the outcomes from that reflection?
4) Did you experience an improvement in your awareness of the other culture's values and behaviour?
5) Did you experience an improvement in your awareness of your own culture's values and behaviour?
6) Did the team as a whole discuss or record any change in their attitudes and behaviour?
7) On the basis of your experience with this project would you approach another project with the same culture in a different way?
8) Would it influence your approach to a similar project but with a different cultural partner?

Section 3 Individual to organisational learning

The final set of questions is about the relation between the project and the host institution – the University. (Clarify which institution they are referring to)

1) What was your perception of the organisational attitude to the project at the outset?
2) Was the project well-supported and/or part of a larger commitment to intercultural collaboration?
3) Was the project team influenced by existing organisational knowledge about collaboration across cultures?
4) How were the findings of the project fed back to the host institution?
5) Was there a conscious attempt to share specifically cultural learning from the project with colleagues in the institution (beyond the team members)?
6) Do you think it likely that the institutional support/attitude to future projects of this kind might be different?

Notes:

Notes:

Notes:

27

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#4 **The Learning Process Model for Intercultural Partnerships**

#5 **The Learning Process in Intercultural Collaboration:**
Evidence from the eChina-UK Programme

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