Leading Expanding Pre-Sessional Programmes Successfully: An International Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

Pre-sessional programmes can be highly rewarding to design and deliver, but they can also be extremely demanding and challenging for those tasked with running them. This paper considers the case of one pre-sessional programme that developed from an online eight-week postgraduate course in 2022, attended by 43 students, into a significantly larger undertaking. Within a couple of years, the programme expanded to offer two, four and eight-week onsite options, along with a three-week undergraduate pathway. The 8-week course in 2024 was completed by 347 students. In 2025 the projected enrollment figure is approximately 450 students, and a new three-week course also set to begin. This study will present the contextual background for the pre-sessional programme and a brief literature review, before discussing the programme's effectiveness, the challenges alongside the future plans. The paper should be of interest to course designers, faculties, and institutional administrators and managers, amongst others, from both pedagogic, administrative, leadership and income generating perspectives.

Keywords: Pre-sessional, Programme, Leadership, Management, CPD.

1. Introduction

Pre-sessional courses play an important role for many higher education institutions, as they enable students who have not met all of the language enrollment requirements with the opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved the desired level of language proficiency for postgraduate study upon course completion. In some cases, institutions offer a suite of courses designed to help students who have met the entry enrollment requirements and hold conditional offers to enhance their language, study and research skills, as well as acclimatise to the new prior to the start of their postgraduate studies, thereby providing them with a competitive edge.

Designing pre-sessional courses is a challenging endeavour. It necessitates meticulous attention to all areas of curriculum development for each individual course. This includes features such as the establishment of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) based on the needs analysis

outcomes, devising a structure, adopting a methodology, building materials and the implementation of robust assessment mechanisms. Considering those facets advocated by scholars such as Brown (1995) and Richards (2001) over the past three decades has proved to help better ensure students achieve the required level of mastery. The designing also entails facilitating reflection practice post-course, which might be in the form of the suppositions of Klob (1984), Gibbs (1988) or Brookfield (1998). Ultimately the intention is ensuring that learners attain the necessary proficiency through systematically designed courses and programmes that enable deliberate practice of the core skills (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

This can be a complex and demanding task from a logistical perspective. In terms of mandatory courses, it requires programmes to be meticulously designed and built of firm foundations in the form of well-defined ILOs and the assessment validity and reliability, ensuring that achievement is acting as a representative measure of attainment. This is where references to standardised language tests such as IELTs and CEFR levels may be relevant, and in the case of optional courses, especially at the postgraduate level, TOEFL iBT and PTE (Academic) may also be considered. Besides the challenges of aligning language levels, or at least attempting to, other challenges include liaising with stakeholders such as faculties and external examiners, attaining annual validation or accreditation (for example, through CIOL), and ensuring that the logistics of delivery and accommodation need to be effectively managed for on-site delivery. Furthermore, payment and insurance measures are the prerequisites to appoint adequate numbers of staff for the course delivery.

This paper thus considers the case of a transnational higher education provider that experienced an eight-fold increase in enrollment within two years, transitioning from online to on-site offering. These developments occurred concurrently with a doubling of study options. Given the challenge of accommodating increased student numbers, expanding provisional offerings and shifting delivery method, this case study seeks to highlight the lessons learned from administering pre-sessional programmes and courses at a transnational higher education provider in China, and to provide insights. It should be of interest to curriculum designers, administrators, programme leaders and faculty, alongside heads of department tasked with budgeting.

2. Contextual Background

The transnational higher education provider at which this suite of pre-sessional courses was implemented is located in eastern China. The university is also home to more that 10,000 students from over 70 countries and regions around the world as the university website notes. The university provides both undergraduate and postgraduate study routes and is part of a tri campus set up operating in the UK, China and Malaysia. In order to better support some of the incoming students, especially at postgraduate level, a variety of pre-sessional courses are

offered. These are designed to help students improve their language and academic competencies, as well as adapt to what may be a different study environment than the students have previously been familiar with. In terms of pricing, the China based campus in question offered four pre-sessional courses in 2024. There were eight, four and two-week postgraduate options. There was also a bespoke three-week undergraduate course. The eight-week pre-sessional course which cost 28,000 RMB per student (as advertised on the institutional website) would have generated close to 10,000,000 RMB.

3. Methodology

To consider the effectiveness of the pre-sessional courses, a comprehensive range of data collection methods and tools were employed. These include student feedback on the various courses, alongside feedback provided by the academic manager, who gathered insights from the team responsible for running the programme, the course instructors and the external examiner and CIOL. Student feedback at this transnational higher education provider is generated at the end of every taught course through a questionnaire administered anonymously on Microsoft Forms. This data collection instrument exhibits satisfactory levels of face, construct, and content validity. In terms of reliability, it is deemed to be reasonably robust, however, it is acknowledged that the timing of administration may potentially influence the feedback provided. Consequently, the utilisation of alternative sources of feedback is essential to corroborate the findings. Staff feedback is collected via a range of mediums and conducted in a critically reflective, 360-degree manner. Pragmatic limitations necessitate that not all of the data can be presented in this instance, so the voice of the staff member who was responsible for leading the programme has been considered to cover the various sub areas. This paper also adheres to stringent safeguarding protocols, aligning with BERA's (2024) suppositions including, anonymity and confidentiality amongst others.

4. Results

4.1. The Eight-Week Course

Revalidated in 2024 for the academic year by CIOL (The Chartered Institute of Linguists), the eight-week course, which consisted of two modules, received excellent mean average feedback from the students who completed it. Indeed, the feedback improved in seven of the ten categories, remained the same in two areas and dipped by 0.01 points in the final area. Some of the notable feedback included 96% of students strongly agreeing with the statement the programme helped them prepare for postgraduate study, 94% strongly agreeing that the programme had enhanced their confidence, and a mean score of 4.80 out of 5 for the statement 'I received a lot of academic and non-academic support during the programme'. Regarding the

Reading, Writing and Research Skills (RWRS) module, the mean average was 4.63. For the Listening, Discussion and Presentation (LDP) module, the score was 4.74. By all accounts, these are outstanding results to return.

4.2. The Shorter Courses

4.2.1. The Four-Week Course

The four-week course catered to one class of less than twenty students. Due to the morning and afternoon sessions, two staff members were required to teach the course for the duration of the four weeks. RWRS received a mean average of 5.00 as did LDP. The Academic Manager remarked:

> *The two staff members did an excellent job and the student feedback was outstanding with both receiving incredibly high mean averages from the class. I was aware that the course needed refining and future proofing, which is why ultimately it was phased out and replaced the following academic year after consultation with all of the stakeholders and a 360-degree evaluation.*

4.2.2 The Two-Week Course

In contrast, the two-week course failed to run in its inaugural year. Despite initial interest, the enrollment threshold was not met, meaning that it would have operated at a loss had it run at a time when resources were already stretched due to the impressive growth of the eight-week course as the CIOL review highlighted. As a result, a strategic decision was made to offer students who had expresses an interest the opportunity to enroll in the four-week course instead. The two-week course was subsequently merged with the four-week course. The Academic Manager commented:

> *There was a slight sense of relief when the decision was made to not run the course. Despite it being a really interesting course to teach, and a short one in terms of duration, time and resource wise we were already stretched and this would have just added another layer of pressure which would have been far from ideal. It also wouldn't have made financial sense to operate it at a loss.*

An additional staffing challenge had also arisen in the need to build and deliver a three-week undergraduate pre-sessional course in the Summer of 2024, stretching staffing resources to the limit.

4.2.3 The Three-Week Course

The unexpected, and late addition, of another pre-sessional course for incoming undergraduates from select localities which would necessitate another four staff for delivery. An experienced faculty member and team unit were drafted in to support with the construction and management of this provisional offering in consultation with the Academic Manager. Unlike the other postgraduate courses, which focused heavily on language and academic skills, this one had more of a language and digital literacy focus, designed to align with the skills these students would need going forward, but would likely require developing in the interim given their relative staring point. The Academic Manager noted:

> *Having another very experienced team leader take ownership of this new and last-minute course addition was really helpful. I'd already been asked to teach over the summer due to the expansion of the eight-week programme, as had the two module conveners, and the stakes were significantly higher with so many more students sitting the longer mandatory course as well as the staff working on it. I had to trust my colleague with the three-week course, although some leeway existed for contingency support if needed. He really did an amazing job and was acknowledged for his delivery success the next semester with an award.*

5. Discussion

5.1. The Importance of Teamwork

The success of the pre-sessional courses can be largely attributed to the effective teamwork observed throughout the programme, as highlighted by discussions with the Academic Manager and supported by the academic output of the team (Kozuch et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2024). Each team member was well aware of their role and responsibilities, and clear procedures and processes were established, alongside timelines agreed upon well in advance. This structured approach allowed for flexibility and responsiveness, even when facing the challenges of not knowing exactly how many students the programme had to cater to until late in the planning process. Strong leadership at all levels and a supportive and collaborative culture enabled a flexible and responsive approach to exist. A systematic approach to change management, including job shadowing and deliberate practice, as advocated by Ericsson and Pool (2016), further enhanced the likelihood of a high-quality end product outcomes. For example, new Academic Managers or Module Conveners (MCs) would job shadow their predecessors for 6-12 months to ensure a smooth transition and continuity, and this was based on reflective experiences of what had and had not worked so well previously when taking on new management and leadership roles. Teamwork was also highlighted by the External Examiner based at Polytechnic University as a strength and the pre-sessional team have continued to

engage with institutional training in operational leadership as well as assess their own strengths through considering the findings from Gallup Strengths Finder and MBTI to support more personalised CPD.

5.2. The Necessity of Trust and Collaboration

Kozuch et al. (2023) stress that well-designed pre-sessional courses, adequately staffed with balanced workloads, are crucial for success. Effective relationships management, open communication, and the willingness to incorporate external feedback are also vital. This programme exemplifies these principles through high levels of collaboration in evidence with staff from all areas working together, actively reflection and the sharing of insights. In many ways it is a case of practicing what is being preached with the team embracing research both in terms of course deign and through their own working endeavours. The programme's commitment to transparency and distributed leadership fosters trust and ensures that all stakeholders, including staff, students and all invested parties, can share insights at any point, through any staff member. This open communication and collaborative approach are key to the programme's success. One area in which further improvements could be made revolves around faculty consultation given an emerging opportunity at the institution. With the preliminary year content modules moving back into the departments after a ten-year hiatus as part of the pedagogic restructuring it is possible for even stronger ties to be facilitated. This would also support BALEAP accreditation designs as the eight-week course seeks external recognition to sync with CIOL validation already in place.

5.3. Present Challenges

There are a wide variety of potential challenges that can arise when teaching pre-sessional courses. Evans (2022) drawing on his experiences of teaching pre-sessional courses a Cardiff, Durham, Newcastle Universities highlights how rapid the growth in student numbers, course changes and overhauls, alongside stakeholder consultations and constructive component feature alignment (features identified by Biggs and Tang, 2011) presented difficulties. In this instance, concerning the UNNC pre-sessional programme, the MCs noted the challenges in the eight-week course content. For LDP, some of the most notable challenges included making the tasks as authentic as possible, whilst diversifying the listening material and assessments. For RWRS, key challenges were deemed to be the new methods of learning incoming students had to adapt to in a short period of time and the workload on an intensive module that the students felt stretched them and extended their learning. The varying language levels of the incoming students were becoming more pronounced. Administratively, the continued growth placed strain on the delivery in terms of sustainability due to staffing limits, alongside teaching and learning spaces and student support. The external examiner also highlighted the need to consider the integration of Generative AI into the curriculum.

5.4. **Forward Thinking**

By systematically and intentionally building a culture that supported measured risk taking, such as devising a three-week course combining an under subscribed two-week course, and a four-week course in need of a review the team clearly took a proactive approach to their courses as opposed to resting on their laurels and opting for the easy option. It might be cautioned that change fatigue could result, but there were also strategic designs to the changes, namely reducing provisional offerings which might stretch staffing beyond acceptable limits. Clearly in this respect, there were elements of critically reflective practice in evidence as advocated by Brookfield (2005) as the best features of both shorter courses were being carried into the new three-week offering, as well as forward thinking as this shorter course was also being used to trial features that might carry over into the eight-week course, but in a setting in which the stakes were lower. For example, more authentic tasks were being built as central tenets of the course, and the use of GenAI revisited. This also built on broader faculty developments in which language assessment was being scaled back on EAP modules in light of technological developments and the enhanced digital literacy of the students. Practical changes were also being enacted based on some of the 360-degree feedback, with the number of assessments reduced in cases where the ILOs were already arguably being assessed in a similar duplicate manner. Staff were also engaging with reflective practice through sharing their learning with others, adhering to the premise that learning is facilitated through teaching (Duran, 2016) or knowledge transfer as the work of Kozuch et al., (2023) and Morris et al., (2024) highlight.

6. Conclusion

This paper has considered the case of a transnational higher education provider that has experienced rapid expansion in its pre-sessional offerings in terms of student numbers and course variety over the past few years. It has considered how the various courses were received, the factors contributing to the programme's success, and the challenges that have had to be resolved and which remain at the forefront of thinking. Some key metrics of success include the rapid growth of the programme in terms of student numbers and, hence supporting the various institutional faculties with ensuring students are prepared for future study needs. In addition, as a financial source of revenue, the programme is also fulfilling a useful role for the Centre when many departments face financial difficulties as Leeming (2024) draws attention to. Future proofing the course to ensure that it is sustainable has also received attention.

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