

The Declining Value of Vocational Programs in China

Written by Donald Guadagni

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DONALD GUADAGNI, JUN 13 2016

Vocational programs which include “working internships” offered a novel approach to bridging the employment gap for sectors in need of trained blue collar technical and low lever white collar workers in a shorten amount of time. Typically, three years with internship or one to two year without. Some vocational programs are as long as seven years. As opposed to having to rely on either entry level employees directly out of the high school or those students who opted for a traditional two year or four year programs with an associated degreed major. These latter options generally lack work related foundation experience. In theory, institutions attempt to forecast which vocational trades would become marketable and economically necessary during the training cycle and adjust the curriculum accordingly to meet this need. Concurrently partnering with local and regional businesses to provide students with an opportunity to acquire work related experience and skills “interning” during the summer holiday in the first two years of the program and longer weekly hours in the third year after the core academic and skills studies have been completed.

During my tenure working with these types of institutions I observed and noted that these programs were neither flexible or reflexive enough to adjust to current employment sector demands nor was there an accurate forecast mechanism to predict shifts in both the sector needs and changing demographics necessary to support and sustain vocational programs having a duration of more than one year. Due to the operational nature of the programs often the initial curriculum failed to keep pace with the changing technical and core skills necessary to successfully enter into the work force as “well qualified” for the positions.

Secondarily, these programs would often become obsolete during the course of training leaving the students in a position of acquired training and skills without available job vacancies after graduation. Concurrently there is a lack of marketable variety / viability in there programs which has the effect of over saturating target employment sectors and diminishing the utility of the vocational programs and its relative worth of time and tuition spent in the programs. These programs have become more of a gimmick than a vocational / pedagogical venue for students with diminishing product value. The underlying weakness was an off-centered focus that introduced numerous western style paradigms that were not a good fit for regional or national socioeconomic employment. This was further compounded by attempts to teach students well beyond their English language ability. The courses were touted as superior to mainstream college and university programs by virtue of name brand recognition and had higher enhanced tuition and fees attached to them. Courses that centered around western IT and accounting failed to embrace prevailing national standards and attempted to teach materials that either did not match demographic or technology standards which relied on dated technology and vastly different accounting practices.

Ultimately these programs targeted Chinese middle class students and exploited educational ignorance to promote bridge programs that purportedly would allow graduating students to attend overseas “sister” institutions upon completion. Systematic weakness in both local teaching cadre and pecuniary considerations to include retention of “foreign experts” (degree holders) not actual teachers led to increasing abuses and pressure by institution to solicit students to enroll in outside support programs in order to improve their English language skills sufficiently to understand the materials. This led to escalating failure rates among students and the prospect of loss of enhanced tuition monies for schools. Reflexively institutions softened testing and grading standards in order to bolster an image that promoted program success. It has been observed that many of these programs over the past five years laude impressive graduation rates and statistics but students in general cannot find employment in their chosen degree /

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vocation field, typically less than ten percent of each class. More to the point, a negligible percentage of program students choose to continue in an overseas venue associated with the programs. In three years I noted less than 4 students in my classes (of approximately 400) advanced their studies using the bridge programs.

The residual value of the programs has produced successive groups of graduating students that have neither gained sufficient language or technical skills to be competitive in the national labor markets. And the integrity erosion of these programs provided nothing greater than that of a diploma mill. Given the current structure and length of the programs it appears counter intuitive for students and their parents to invest their money into these types of programs. Although at the inception the concept held promise, the programs have failed to modernize themselves in terms of flexibility and reflexive correction necessary to adapt to rapidly changing economic and employment sector needs. As such these programs cannot offer full value or benefit as an alternative to traditional education.

About the author:

Donald Guadagni was a foreign expert teaching in Taizhou University and Ningbo City College of vocational technology as one of the first foreigner experts involved in the Sino-US projects class programs beginning in 2011. Prior to teaching in China and Taiwan he taught in the Arizona public school system as a certified educator and his education background includes a degree in computer electronics, teaching certification from Cambridge and course studies in Justice, International law, education and educational technologies from Harvard, Louvain and MIT.