INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION NO. 69 FALL 2012

Challenges in Adopting English-Taught Degree Programs

ANNETTE BRADFORD

Annette Bradford is a doctoral student in the Education Policy program at George Washington University, Washington, DC. E-mail: acb83@gwu.edu.

In an attempt to increase the competitiveness of their higher education systems in the globalizing world, many non-English-speaking countries are increasing the number of degree programs—either partially or entirely, through the medium of English. European universities, most notably those in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, have been administering English-taught programs for a number of years. Yet, concerns about the difficulties of implementation and the quality of these programs are still present. As universities in other parts of the world, particularly in East Asia, are stepping up their numbers of English-taught programs, they are encountering similar challenges.

RISING NUMBERS OF PROGRAMS

With the implementation of the Bologna-process three-cycle system, which was largely completed in 2010, the number of English-taught programs in non-English-speaking Europe has grown dramatically. Recent data reported by the Institute of International Education counted 560 master's programs taught entirely in English—in 2002, 1,500 in 2,008 and 3,701 in 2011—with further 963 programs including English as one of their languages of instruction. In the

Benelux countries and Scandinavia, master's education is now almost entirely conducted in English. At the undergraduate level, entire English-taught degrees are not growing at such remarkable rates, but are nevertheless increasing, with the Netherlands alone reporting over 200 programs to the bachelorsportal.eu database.

In more recent years, East Asian universities have also begun to rapidly expand their offerings in English. Korea has embraced English-medium instruction enthusiastically, with a large number of universities seeking to incorporate it into their existing programs, conducting about 30 percent of their classes in English. Taiwan and Japan are focusing more on entire English-taught programs. Taiwan has at least 170 English-taught programs at various levels, and the Japanese government intends for there to be 157 programs in its 13 Global 30 Project-funded institutions alone by 2014. In mainland China, at the request of the Ministry of Education, Chinese universities teach a growing range of professional subjects entirely in English, including information science, biotechnology, new materials, engineering, international trade, finance, and law.

The challenges that arise alongside the adoption of such programs can be categorized into three types—those related to language, culture, and the structure of the programs.

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

There is concern about the quality of teaching and learning that occurs when instructors and/or students are working in a non-native language. Even students in countries with strong histories of English-language instruction, such as Norway and the Netherlands, have reported concerns with unfamiliar

vocabulary and trouble taking notes, while listening in English-medium classes. Consequently, instructors need to make constant adaptation to their lectures, and this affects the quality and quantity of content that can be taught over a semester.

Limitations in professors' linguistic competencies also pose challenges for program quality. European students regularly identify insufficiency in the oral skills of their professors, leading to a loss of confidence in professors' content knowledge. Professors themselves have commented that classes can become dry and technical when their language abilities prevent them from recounting anecdotes or using colloquial language.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Higher education institutions that adopt English as the medium of instruction are opening themselves up to more diverse student and teacher populations, with a greater range of cultural norms and expectations. These differences can permeate all levels of the English-taught program—including classroom behavior, forms of assessment, and teacher evaluation. This presents challenges for educators accustomed to teaching a fairly homogenous body of students, as they may lack the intercultural knowledge important for developing internationalized curricula, adopting more inclusive practices, and promoting reciprocal cultural understanding. Such pragmatic ability is more serious than language proficiency, when conducting English-medium classes.

Many observers have remarked that English instruction leads to an "Americanization" of classroom and accountability practices, partly due to the difficulty of separating English from its dominant culture and to the need for international transparency in the programs. This can create particular difficulties

in Asian classrooms, where traditional pedagogy emphasizes the authority of the teacher and most of the international students are likely to hail from other Asian nations.

Linguistic and cultural challenges increase the burden that the English-taught programs place on faculty. For example, estimates assess that it takes four to five times more effort for a Japanese professor to teach in English rather than in Japanese, and studies in Taiwan have revealed dissatisfaction with the amount of time it takes to prepare a class that caters to diverse learning styles. Even Danish and Finnish professors, with high levels of communicative English ability, have expressed reluctance to teach in English-medium programs. Faculty burden can be alleviated by employing native-English speakers. However, problems exist in recruiting and retaining these faculty members, extra payment may be required to make employment attractive, and they are not always available for long-term teaching contracts—often because of employment regulations and visa restrictions.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Structural challenges are those related to the administration and management of the programs. In addition to finding faculty to teach in the programs, any institution adopting English-medium instruction must also extend its administration and support services to cater to a new heterogeneous student and faculty body in English. Students enrolled in the English-taught programs also typically need more support than local students. In particular, they require help with housing, transferring foreign credentials to the host nation, and extra academic and pastoral counseling. In many nations, administrative staff do not

specialize and are not assigned to one office for more than a few years. Thus, it can be difficult to find personnel with the required skills.

Another structural challenge to the implementation of these programs is that of institutional intransigence. Supranational and national initiatives such as the European Bologna Declaration and Japanese Global 30 Project have enabled English-taught programs to be introduced, but it is the stakeholders within the higher education institutions to allow them to thrive. Without buy-in from institutional stakeholders, such as the professors' councils and faculty, English-instruction programs are not likely to be implemented as intended.

MOVING FORWARD

To aid successful implementation of English-taught programs, institutions should direct attention to addressing the three challenges set out above. Valuable elements of student and faculty support could include language and academic-skills classes for students and intercultural teaching skills classes for faculty. Programs in Taiwan are taking actions that exemplify this sort of proactive engagement with the challenges seen in previous cases. National Taiwan University of Science and Technology offers a free summer intensive English program for domestic students, to enable them to participate in English-taught classes; and National Chang Hwa Normal University offers pedagogical workshops for its faculty. Similarly, Yuan Ze University partnered with the University of New South Wales, to send faculty to Australia for intensive training to enhance their abilities to deliver programs in English. In order to address structural challenges, universities should adjust administration practices,

including those related to administrative staff and faculty employment, to enable positive outcomes for their programs.