

EVALUATION OF THE PSU 2004

Report to ATA

Subject: Pristina Summer University 2004
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Introduction

The Academic Training Association (ATA) asked me to serve as the independent evaluator for the Pristina Summer University (PSU) 2004. In this capacity, I observed the functioning of the PSU during a period of six days and had the opportunity to attend ten courses, one forum, one excursion, and several other extracurricular activities including a soccer tournament and a choir performance. I had formal interviews with four members of the ATA staff, six visiting professors, four co-professors, two logistics officers, one translator, and several students. I was also involved in a great many informal interviews and discussions, as I attempted to “hang around” as much as possible. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet with representatives from the University of Pristina (UP). This last point merits further comment.

Because UP representatives were not available for interview, my capacity to provide a thorough, well-rounded evaluation concerning important issues, such as the role of the UP and the possibility of a successful project transfer, is significantly restricted. The associated section of this report is based solely upon understanding drawn from observations of, and conversations with ATA staff and local professors. Even if this understanding were entirely positive, I would still be obligated to provide a disclaimer. However, given that my understanding is fairly critical, I am placed in a sensitive position. On the one hand, I am simply not capable of representing all of the parties involved in this project, and so I should, perhaps, refrain from any and all critical discussion. On the other hand, my limited understanding of this project’s development is not incompatible with the very fact that renders my understanding limited, namely, the absence of the UP officials during the final week of the summer university. After considering this position, I decided to offer critical, albeit qualified remarks concerning important issues, rather than exclude them entirely. My reasoning was based upon the premise that a qualified and inconclusive report would prove more beneficial to ATA, its partners, and its donors than one that clearly excludes such issues. Because my capacity to offer a rigorous evaluation is limited, the relevant section will simply attempt to focus attention upon problematic issues rather than provide definitive analyses and recommendations. I sincerely hope that this evaluation reflects these intentions.

This evaluation focuses upon five points:

- The quality of the academic program and extracurricular activities
- The success of the project in training young staff
- The use of English language testing
- The quality of the organization of the project
- The role of the UP and the likelihood of a successful transfer

Academic and Extracurricular Program

The course selection was substantial and diverse, with 36 offerings from the humanities, physical and social sciences, medicine, and law. However, the range of academic rigor varied significantly among these courses. The course materials seemed current, interesting, and challenging. In a few cases, the professors had prepared supplementary commentary in response to student work. The use of infrastructure and technology to enhance learning was significantly restricted. However, I witnessed one case in which a professor improvised a computer-based demonstration after discovering that there was an overhead projector available. One striking exception was the telemedicine course, conducted at the newly constructed telemedicine center, which was fully equipped with stadium seating, projectors and flat screen televisions.

The multi-cultural composition of the study body was clearly an asset to the academic program, particularly where interactive teaching methods were employed. However, it appeared as though several students were unprepared for the coursework that the visiting professors had planned to offer. Several professors discussed the need to revise the program in order to accommodate the class's level, or to focus upon fundamental skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. The majority of students appeared to be engaged in the coursework. However, there were also groups of students who appeared to be more interested in extracurricular activities than academic affairs.

The visiting professors were clearly experts- or burgeoning experts- in their respective fields of study. The teaching methods and styles employed varied from frontal lectures and professor-led discussions to problem and case-based group work, guest lectures, class excursions, and student presentations. In general, these variations were consistent with the content of the course, although some courses may have benefited from more interactive teaching methods. In general, professors were very understanding and accommodating without abandoning the program. In one course, when students were uncomfortable giving presentations, the professors made sample presentations as though they were students.

Although I was not able to judge the quality of translation from English to Albanian, the students with whom I spoke felt that the objective quality of translation was quite good. In some cases, local students assisted the translator with technical terminology. However, several students confirmed my observation that the *use* of translation was not always ideal. For example, sequential translation often fragmented the lecture, rendering the

argument difficult to follow in both English and Albanian. This was particularly true where the professor's English skills were less than ideal or where the professor and translator had difficulty timing their statements. In other cases, the sporadic use of translation was not sufficient for those students with inadequate English language skills.

The method of evaluation and grading seemed appropriate in almost all cases. However, there was significant discussion surrounding the issue of "grading on a curve", or distributive grading, as set out in the Bologna Declaration. Although ATA required professors to use this distributive grading method, several professors felt that imposing this grading scheme on their particular class was inappropriate. I did not inspect final grades to determine the extent to which professors complied with ECTS grading standards. In addition, several students felt that a requirement to deliver a type-written, or digital, final paper was inappropriate considering the circumstances—the supply of freely available computers did not meet student demand.

Regarding the integrity of the academic environment, the issue of plagiarism should be mentioned. Judging from my discussions with professors, it was not entirely clear that those students who committed plagiarism understood the definition of plagiarism, or that they knew the standards for incorporating quotations into their text. It would be reasonable to recommend that professors who require substantial writing should review the meaning of plagiarism and the accepted systems for documenting sources, whether MLA, APA, or footnotes and endnotes.

In addition to the regular academic program, I had the opportunity to attend a forum on minority rights, to join a weekend excursion, and to attend a choir performance. In general, these events were well organized and well implemented considering the local circumstances. Although the choir performance was quite perfect, the forum lacked depth, interactivity and concreteness due, it seemed, to the local political situation, and the excursion was lengthy, warm, and bus-intensive due to the distances involved and the quality of buses rented. Nonetheless, students seemed to benefit from these events and to accept the difficulties that resulted from local conditions, whether political or mechanical. There were, however, a couple of organizational difficulties on the excursion, primarily related to hierarchy and division of responsibilities. Such organizational issues are further discussed in the Organization section of this document.

Co-professors

In several cases it was apparent that the visiting professor had a profound, positive affect upon the skills and motivation of the respective co-professor. On more than one occasion, explicit mention was made to the transfer of interactive and problem-based teaching methods. However, several *co-professors* demonstrated leadership as well, for example by organizing factory visits or interviews with local leaders. Thus, several relationships reflected the ideal visiting professor – co-professor collaboration, where responsibilities were shared in a complimentary manner and where valuable skills were transferred to young, local staff. Not surprisingly, the most productive relationships

between visiting professors and co-professors were found among pairs that had worked together in the past, where the visiting professor truly valued the contribution made by the co-professor and where the co-professor was genuinely interested in learning about progressive teaching methods and current knowledge in the field. However, there were also several cases in which the co-professor was involved very little, if at all. Although I am not in a position to determine the reasons for the co-professors' failure to engage in the program, suggestions pointed towards non-academic motivation for participation, such as prestige, remuneration, and/or potential to establish international contacts.

English Language Testing

The majority of this section is based upon a formal interview with Carola Schmidt, the member of ATA's Amsterdam staff most involved in English language testing. However, fragments of interviews with professors and students, in addition to personal observations, are incorporated as well.

Professor feedback after PSU 2003 indicated that many students should be, "more thoroughly tested." In response to this recommendation, ATA enhanced the English language testing component of the admissions procedure. Last year, only the written Cambridge Quick Placement Test (QPT) was utilized. This year, ATA utilized a hybrid test, composed of questions both taken from, and modeled after, the QPT. This exam was administered to all local students who applied for courses taught in English and in Albanian with English translation. An additional listening test was administered to students in English-only courses, and an oral test was administered to students in one course at the professor's request. In general, ATA seems to have implemented the actual language testing in a fair and reliable manner, as conditions were designed to maintain consistency and discourage dishonesty.

Although the testing procedure was fairly smooth, the planning and organization surrounding English level testing could be improved to some extent. For example, this project requires the organizers to make a fairly accurate estimate regarding the number of applicants to be tested, given that all of those students who pass the exam should be enrolled. Testing too many students may lead to over-enrollment, which in turns engenders complications regarding, for example, budget constraints and classroom interaction. However, testing too few students may necessitate additional testing sessions, which consumes additional staff time and resources. Formulating an accurate estimate is not any easy task and surely results from experience. Although the project directors advised the local staff to increase the number of students to be tested for this session, the local staff was reluctant to do so, and as a result, was obliged to conduct additional testing sessions. Although the project's efficiency may have suffered somewhat, I believe that ATA acted wisely by consciously permitting the local staff to make the final decision on this matter and to take responsibility for the outcome. Allowing such "mistakes" is an essential aspect of passing expertise to the local organizers, as will be discussed the following sections.

In addition to estimating the number of students to be tested, it is also important for the organizers and the co-professors to agree upon a timeline for making definitive decisions regarding the language of instruction and the final roster for each class. Altering the language of instruction or adding students to the class after applicants have been chosen for testing may be problematic. Similarly, the organizers must continue to communicate to applicants that strict English language testing will be utilized, explain the rationale behind such testing, and encourage potential applicants to obtain adequate English language skills before applying. In general, it appears as though the organization, planning, and communication surrounding English language testing will continue to improve as local staff and co-professors, as well as students from the region, gain experience with this process.

In the end, professors seemed mostly satisfied with the language skills of their students, and returning professors noted improvement when comparing to last year. My observations confirmed that most students demonstrated an adequate command of spoken English, but that levels tended to vary substantially among students. It is worth noting that several professors seemed to have alleviated the challenges associated with minimal English skills by engendering a very comfortable learning environment.

Organization

In general, the PSU 2004 was running smoothly when I arrived at the beginning of the third week. Professors and students felt that the program was well organized and, for the most part, were focused upon the academic program and extracurricular activities. However, the work of the logistics officers was sometimes disruptive, for example when the officer took attendance or made an announcement after class had begun. The organizers themselves were occupied to a healthy degree and, although somewhat stressed, exhibited the flexibility necessary to operate in an environment where conditions are continuously changing. Still, there were fundamental problems, such as the lack of a functioning generator for the ATA office. This problem made it difficult for staff members to complete important computer-dependent tasks, and remained unsolved until the final days of the session.

Not surprisingly, the young, busy, multi-cultural staff experienced difficulties associated with hierarchy, division of labor, and planning. Balancing efficiency and stability against flexibility and a sense of egalitarianism is a challenge under such circumstances. Some members of ATA's Amsterdam staff had difficulty "finding their place", i.e. evaluating the extent to which they should offer suggestions and/or delegate responsibilities to local staff. One interviewee noted that although ATA staff members had clearly defined roles in Amsterdam, they did not have well defined roles in Pristina, which contributed to confusion during the PSU. Although staff meetings were held daily, these tended to focus upon immediate problems and did not address broader issues, such as hierarchy and division of responsibilities.

Open discussion of organizational hierarchy and division of labor- and the associated rationales- may help managers to delegate responsibility in a more effective manner, rather than deliberating in order to maintain an implied egalitarianism. Further, failures to delegate responsibility often had negative consequences. The "manager"

became overworked and unable to fulfill his/her managerial role, and a potentially valuable learning experience was taken from the person who would have performed the task. Such behavior may also decrease the engagement of the “subordinate”, as he/she expects the manager to cover their responsibilities in the end. If the “subordinate” is local and the manager is not, then the conflict between producing a high quality project and transferring capacity to local staff is reflected at the micro level (This point is further discussed in the Transfer section). This project might benefit from a clear and consistent organizational approach, such that the directors determine the level of hierarchy and division of labor most suitable to the project’s conditions and objectives, and the managers maintain this dynamic. Of course, these issues could be openly discussed with the entire staff before the actual summer session begins.

Finally, although overall communication between ATA and the professors appeared very strong, it could have been improved slightly regarding logistical changes that arose during the session. For example, the organizers chose to slightly alter the ECTS certificate process in order to incorporate photocopying. As a result, several professors expressed confusion, which led to unnecessary misunderstanding. Although the process was not complicated, it is extremely important. For this reason, ATA should insure that professors maintain a clear understanding of such essential processes, as educators may be sensitive to processes that seem “administration driven.”

Transfer

The purpose of this section is to evaluate two independent, albeit related points; the extent to which responsibilities for the planning and implementation of the PSU 2004 were transferred from ATA to the UP, and the probability that the UP will have the commitment and the capacity to manage a successful PSU in 2005. Although it may appear as though a significant transfer of responsibilities in 2004 is a precondition for a successful session in 2005, this is not necessarily the case, as the composition of the UP leadership may alter as a result of elections scheduled for October.

Please note that my qualifying remarks in this document’s introduction are particularly relevant to this section.

It was my impression that some positive steps had been made during the past year with regard to transferring responsibility for the PSU to the UP. There was general agreement that the deans largely fulfilled their tasks of assessing priorities and presenting course suggestions, appointing co-teachers and logistics officers, and selecting visiting professors. With regard to the deans, one of the primary issues of concern was the need for timely distribution of information regarding co-teaching opportunities. More importantly, it was reported, in a quite positive context, that the PSU Committee was highly involved in the selection of courses for the PSU 2004. However, section 13.2 of the PSU project proposal, which sets out the “Job division, responsibilities, and main tasks”, stipulates that, “the Committee has overall responsibility for the development of the complete Course Program, Public Forum Program, and Recreational Program.” As far as I could ascertain, the committee assumed partial responsibility for the Course Program,

that pertaining to the selection of courses, but significantly less responsibility for the Public Forum or Recreational Programs. Hence, with regard to these tasks, responsibilities have not been fully transferred to the PSU Committee. In general, one was given the impression that the actual project was primarily developed and implemented by ATA and approved by the UP Committee. This division of responsibilities is not consistent with those laid out in the project's objectives.

ATA appears to have faced a potential dilemma not uncommon to donor-supported NGOs that implement "development" projects with a strong "sustainability" component. Two of the PSU project's objectives may come into conflict; (1) the objective to produce a successful summer university and (2) the objective to transfer responsibility to the UP. Overall, ATA appears to have given priority to the first objective, possibly- but not necessarily- sacrificing the second. Although responsibility was definitively delegated to the UP or to local ATA staff in some cases, it was subsequently retained in other cases apparently in order to insure effective completion of the associated task. In general, it appears as though ATA has been more comfortable retaining responsibility than transferring it to the UP. Based upon limited anecdotal evidence, this seems to be a defensible position. The essential result has been four largely successful summer sessions. Of course, one cannot know for certain what outcome would have resulted from a definitive transfer of all responsibilities regarding planning and development from ATA to the UP.

The working relationship between the UP leadership and ATA, including both the Amsterdam and Pristina staff, although stable and functionally sufficient, appears to exhibit deficiencies. Based upon interviews and observations during a brief, six-day visit, I was given the impression that some of these deficiencies may be attributable to the time and energy that UP officials are willing and able to devote to this project. That UP representatives were not present during the third and final week of the PSU, and that the closing ceremony was cancelled due to their absence, contributes to this impression. Although mitigating circumstances may decrease the significance of their absence, it is relevant that Martijn Meeter's evaluation of PSU 2003 also notes the absence of UP officials. Still, the UP has displayed public interest in the project during the past four years, and this interest has translated into an enhanced level of public awareness and support for the PSU. However, it seems fair to say that the UP must devote additional time and energy to guiding and supervising the PSU if a complete transfer is to occur.

Beyond fundamental issues regarding workload and commitment, issues that appeared to invoke discord between ATA and the UP were often related to the distribution of resources allocated to the PSU. For example, friction was directly or indirectly related to the selection of accommodation for visiting professors, the selection of co-teachers and logistics officers, and the selection and/or retention of ATA staff. Ineffective decision making on this level may have a variety of negative, expansive consequences. With regard to co-teachers, for example, the selection of individuals who do not possess a genuine commitment to the program deprives the visiting professor, students, and the would-be co-teacher from a valuable experience. Further, uncommitted co-teachers place ATA in the difficult position of having to decide whether or not to withhold remuneration. In general, it is fair to say that the PSU would benefit from a situation in which ATA and the UP display an equal commitment to transparent and

accountable decision making at the level of resource distribution. Unfortunately, it appears as though local ATA staff members are caught in the center of such challenges, as they must attempt to simultaneously fulfill the directives of both ATA and the UP leadership. This is unfortunate, as their involvement is clearly essential to a successful transfer.

Continuation of the project will also depend upon the composition of the future UP leadership, which may alter as a result of the October elections. If the current officials remain in office, then it is reasonable to assume that the existing challenges will endure. If new officials are elected to office, then the success of future PSU sessions will depend upon the commitment of these individuals.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are ranked here in order of perceived importance.

- Given that the newly elected, or re-elected, UP officials exhibit a strong commitment to the PSU project, the following recommendations would be applicable.
 - Those individuals who have worked as local ATA staff should serve as the primary repository of institutional knowledge and experience in Pristina and should play a central role in aiding elected officials to manage future summer sessions. (The UP Rectorate has already hired one member of the local ATA staff to serve as “PSU Coordinator.”)
 - The project directors should consider decreasing the magnitude of the PSU in order to render the project more sustainable, in both financial and practical terms. Funding is often easier to acquire for a modest budget and a less ambitious project is likely to allow the implementers to learn during the process without sacrificing a successful outcome.
 - If possible, ATA should continue to be involved as a monitor and advisor.
- The project directors should consider focusing attention upon the level of hierarchy and division of labor most suitable to the project’s conditions and future objectives, paying particular attention to the potential conflict between insuring successful outcomes and transferring knowledge and expertise.
- The directors should consider focusing attention upon potential conflicts of interests directly or indirectly related to the distribution of resources, as such issues tend to have expansive, negative consequences.
- The organizers should insure that visiting professors and co-professors have a sustained understanding of important administrative processes- such as the certificate process and English language testing- and the underlying rationales.
- The organizers should consider the composite effect of decisions related to language of instruction. For example, utilizing sequential translation in a course where the professor’s English skills are not strong will render comprehension difficult even for those students with advanced English skills.
- The organizers should encourage increased communication between professors and logistics officers in order to avoid class disruptions.

- The organizers should encourage professors to discuss the definition of plagiarism and the methods for citing references with their respective students when applicable.
- The organizers should consider developing protocols for key project components, such as a preparation protocol to insure that the office generator is functioning properly.
- The organizers should attempt to identify a more reliable bus rental agency for long distance excursions.

Conclusion

The Pristina Summer University 2004 was a successful event. The great majority of individuals involved, whether visiting professors, co-professors, students, or organizers expressed some form of personal development, whether academic, social, or professional. Although a relatively young organization, The Academic Training Association has handled the difficulties associated with this project in a professional manner. Clearly, the challenges facing the continuation of this project are significant but not insurmountable. Much knowledge and experience has been acquired by local ATA staff during the past four years, and successful continuation will depend substantially upon the possibility of genuine cooperation between these individuals and future University of Pristina officials.